

NECKBONES AND SAUERFOWCHES: FROM FRACTURED CHILDHOOD IN THE
GHETTO TO CONSTANTLY CHANGING WOMANHOOD IN THE WORLD

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A collection of five memoiristic essays arranged about themes of family, womanhood and the African-American community with a preface. Among the experiences the memoirs recount are childhood abandonment; verbal and emotional child abuse; mental illness; poverty; and social and personal change. Essays explore the lasting impact of abandonment by a father on a girl as she grows into a woman; the devastation of family turmoil and untreated mental illness; generational identity in the African-American community. One essay describes the transition from the identity-forming profession of journalism to academia. The last essay is about complicated and conflicting emotions toward patriotism and flag-waving on the part of a black woman who has lived through riots, little known police shootings of students on black campuses, and many other incidents that have divided Americans.

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PART I
PREFACE

Neckbones and Sauerfowches: From Fractured Childhood in the Ghetto to Constantly Changing Womanhood in the World

In the rare times when my mom and I were alone together simply enjoying each other's company, one of the things I loved to hear was her teasing chant of "neckbones and sauerfowches, neckbones and sauerfowches, tonight we gonna have some good old neckbones and sauerfowches!" "It's not sauerfowches, momma, it's sauerkraut!" I would say in mock outrage at such liberty being taken with the English language (German, really, but what did I know?). "No," she would tease me, "Sauerfowches, sauerfowches, sauerfowches!" And we would both giggle in the kitchen of whichever slummy apartment in one of Cincinnati's black ghettos we found ourselves. Neckbones and sauerkraut comprised a cheap delicious dish that would always take forever to eat. The pork neckbones were large and mostly useless bone in which the marrow broke down to flavor the sauerkraut as dinner simmered in a large pot. Bits of meat were tender and flavorful, but not always easy to find. When the dish was done, what emerged had little in common with the tart sauerkraut that is often slopped onto hotdogs. The sweetish chunks of meat from the neckbones neutralized most of the bitterness of the sauerkraut until it tasted a bit more like what it had been in its unpickled state – cabbage. Still, it was cabbage with a slight bite.

In a sense, writing memoiristic essays is similar to preparing neckbones and sauerkraut. All the elements of my life have been locked in my consciousness, simmering until much of the bitterness has been removed and something flavorful enough to share with the world has emerged. I am grateful that memoirs have become popular in recent years because I believe that memoirists are giving the world a unique gift and expanding the worthwhile genre of creative nonfiction. Our nation and world are complex. We need literature that helps human beings from

different cultures and ethnicities understand each other. I always made it one of my missions in my more than 20 years as a journalist to help people understand each other through my newspaper and magazine articles. Now, as a person changing careers from journalism to academia, I find that I have the tools and the distance to write my own stories. My life has been unusual enough, I believe, for my story to contribute a small patch to the quilt that is being assembled by all the memoirists.

I am at a fateful point in my life. It is a time for reflection and for gathering energy and momentum for a new career and for a new way of life. I am 52 years old, looking back over what has happened with the confidence that I have gained some experience and maturity. I have lived one lifetime. I have had a demanding and successful career; raised two boys alone; and have a physical disability that does not allow me to fool myself that I can be healthy if I continue to meet the grueling hours and erratic schedule required of a newspaperwoman, a job I loved despite its aggravations.

At the same time, my life and my world are changing so rapidly that I can't say with any assurance where I will be living in six months or two years. I feel the need to anchor myself, to find some place where I can be sure of belonging. My vast family of cousins and granduncles in Cincinnati an irresistible pull on me. As I visit Cincinnati to see my loved ones, the voices of my childhood cry out not to be ignored. The old project where my mother and I lived when I was a girl is being demolished. Every time I go to Cincinnati and the old projects, another chunk of my childhood neighborhood has vanished. It was and still is a black neighborhood and a ghetto, but a place of both pleasant and ugly memories for me. I want to record what I can of that place so that my family and my readers will be able to see a world that no longer exists, a world that held both sustenance and deprivation, and that shaped thousands of black children like me.

Aside from the all-encompassing societal limitations to our lives posed by segregation, sexism and poverty, the thing that seemed most to mark my life was the almost daily experience of verbal abuse from my grandmother, my mom's chief partner in raising me. My grandmother, now 95, has always been mentally ill, but as a poor and poorly educated (she did not earn a high school diploma until she was 54) black woman from South Carolina and Cincinnati's public housing projects, she was ill equipped to recognize her own problems or seek help for them. Instead she had almost free rein to make my family's life chaotic, tumultuous and painful. In the absence of my father, who left when I was eight years old, grandmother dominated my existence long after I grew up and moved away from home.

The familial stew in my consciousness has a slight bite, just like my momma's neckbones and sauerfowches.

The New Memoir

The memoirs that are being written today by such writers as Frank McCourt, Annie Dillard, Russell Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Jill Ker Conway and many others have been classified by William Zinsser as "new memoirs." Zinsser says, "A good memoir requires two elements – one of art, the other of craft." (Zinsser, 6)

In writing a memoir, a writer must have some goal beyond regurgitating the details of his or her life, as has been adequate in past autobiographies. A memoir is different from a journal as well, because it is not the first retelling of events from one day to the next, but the selective recounting of certain events to illuminate the writer's background. In highlighting certain events, the writer offers views of his or her world to the larger world and, in doing so, enriches everyone.

Mixing the particular flavors, smells, colors and textures of my childhood world in just the right portions to create a complete and savory stew was a task that required almost a meditative state for me. I was creating something special similar to dishes I have cooked for guests on holiday occasions. To create these dishes, I had to conjure up memories long forgotten that went far beyond my family and its own peculiar dynamics. I hope that in sampling my creations, “readers will be nourished by (my) journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own.” (Zinsser, 6)

Just as I am always perfectly conscious of how each herb or spice tastes when I choose to add it to any given dish, in memoir writing, I am conscious of the flavor I want the text I am constructing to have when it is complete. Zinsser says “memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events.” (Zinsser, 6) What I remember of events that happened more than 40 years ago will not be what my mother or my grandmother would remember. These essays represent the unique view of an only child who was the only one born to my parents. I am well aware that the adults in my life had their own reasons for and versions of what happened, but this is the text of my life I am constructing. It is unique. This is the truth of my life.

Combining craft and art to present a narrative of events in one’s life is a formidable challenge. I found that as I told each story, the images and moods I wanted to convey kept changing. In “Mothers Day,” I wanted to recreate the paradoxical sense of both being ambushed by unexpected attacks and knowing the attacks would never stop, so I constantly changed the typeface to keep the reader off-balance. The essay is like a quilt sewn together from two different colors and fabrics – one, brilliant and eye-popping irregular splashes of rough scarlet burlap for

my grandmother's most violent and bizarre episodes, and the other, a more tranquil background of satiny blue perhaps mixed with lavender for my more serene moments of observation.

In "Dream Daddy," I wanted to foreground the dream sequence, to make it immediately identifiable as apart from my regular waking life, and make the dream seem as it does in my consciousness when I get the sensation of watching a drama unfold on a stage in my own mind. So I chose to use some of the conventions of scriptwriting to make the dream sequence more "stagy." The set decorations and stage directions are in italics, just as they would be in a script, and some other elements, such as the commands from the unseen director are in yet a different typeface.

In other pieces, the artistry is solely in the words, not the appearance of the essay.

Good cooks and quilt makers look at all the tools and materials available to them and change elements of their work to suit the desired effect. I sometimes wonder at my ability to tell my own stories in several different ways. I can disguise an event in my life in fiction or poetry or even a movie script, or uncloak it as fact in a memoir. Is this fickle on my part? Each version for me is true. Each version is different from the others in small ways, but each tells the same story.

Once I chose materials and implements to create my life story as a memoir, I incurred certain responsibilities inherent in the genre. Annie Dillard is succinct about this responsibility, "The writer usually has the privilege, or onus, of labeling the work. Calling it memoir vouches for its veracity; calling it fiction may on a good day alert the world to its literary qualities."

(Dillard, Modern American Memoirs, xi)

The essays in this collection are intimate. They focus on the inner workings of my family and the community in which I grew up, and how those interactions shaped my attitudes, ideas and personality. The goal is less universal truth than personal truth, but I hasten to point out that

some of the same forces that helped mold my outlooks also helped mold the outlooks of millions of African American men and women of the Baby Boom generation. Still, I wrote these essays because I wanted to look at my life from a certain vantage point as a woman who has raised her own children, and now wanted to examine what her own childhood looked like from the other side.

A major challenge in writing a memoir of an abusive and deprived childhood was to resist the temptation to be judgmental, to become the prosecution, judge and jury that condemn some members of my family after a suitable public trial in the pages I've written. The truth, the facts of what happened as I was growing up, carries its own weight. I did not want to ignore the facts, or distort them through sensationalism. Yet, in respect to my own experiences, I had to be truthful about actions and decisions of others that caused me great pain, the kind of pain that never totally disappears. To respect myself as a human being, I owe myself the validation of recounting these hurtful events. As I wrote these essays, I gained empathy for members of my family. I still can't agree with many things they did, but the detachment required to write memoirs has created new and more forgiving ways for me to regard their actions.

Still, whether one is writing a memoir in a misguided effort at catharsis or as a serious intellectual and writing challenge, something happens to memory in the process of putting together that combination of artistry and craftsmanship needed to write a decent memoir. "The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them." (Dillard, Inventing the Truth, 156) As I rearranged events to tell a story rather than simply to recall them in as much detail as possible, they became bits, patches of the quilt I was creating. I can no longer think of those events in the same way. They are part of a new pattern that is more contrived, different from the haphazard one in which they were created as the days of my life progressed. New connections between

events that happened decades apart from each other have been forged in my mind. What seemed to be totally disparate occurrences are now strongly linked in such ways that I can scarcely imagine disconnecting them from each other. These new patterns have given me new insights into cause and effect in my life. As I wrote, I created my own memory.

I left home at 18 to have a life, only to return home in my memory almost every day. I tried not to return to the days of cruelty, poverty, shouting and fear, but there they were behind panic and anxiety attacks, depressions and mistakes in my romantic and financial life. Writing these essays has given me a way of facing the ugly phantom one more time. I found that the act of writing with purpose as a craftswoman and an artist helped immensely to lift these stories from the cathartic realm of journal writing to the level of something more universal.

Remembering that other people would read what I produced made me focus on the writing itself more than my own need for emotional release. I have been to enough psychotherapists over the years to know the difference between emotional release and condemnation, and making a reckoning with the past. I don't seek to justify the actions of my elders in these essays, but I think there is value in sharing them in hopes that someone else, or even I, myself, might gain some understanding of the effects of these actions, such as abandonment and verbal abuse, have on children who have experienced them.

When adults come forward to say that these things that we experienced and survived at early ages did cause long-term damage, we are giving others material for compassion, understanding and exploring some answers that might help other children.

We are also declaring ourselves survivors in a loud voice. The old saying is that the pen is mightier than the sword. With our literary pens, we proclaim that we have withstood all that was thrown at us at an early age and have gone on to live productive lives. Perhaps we give

insight into how we survived and overcame to get to the points in our lives where we are. We have earned the right to proclaim ourselves victorious over our own childhoods.

Creating a “New Collective History”

It would not be possible for me to write memoirs so firmly established in the black community without seriously considering what memoir as a genre can mean to African Americans. So many things that happened to me as a child, a young woman and a mature woman happened because I am black. I cannot ignore that.

Any black writer who seriously intends to write about the inner workings of the black community faces resistance from some other blacks who accuse us of giving up family secrets. They believe that any secrets of the black community should stay within the community. I ran into this phenomenon quite frequently as a reporter who believed that journalism should serve all communities with fair, accurate and balanced reportage. Some black folks did not think that idea extended to revealing the foibles of black people, especially our public officials.

Henry Louis Gates, ran into the same kind of resistance and questioning after the publication of his book Colored People.

A lot of people have said, ‘Did you fear that this was a risk: that you were lifting the family veil and telling family secrets – not only literally family secrets but, metaphorically, family secrets and racial secrets and ethnic secrets?’ The answer is yes. But I wasn’t any more honest about our culture or about my mother’s family than I was about myself. That was important to me. I took myself as the bottom line. I think mine is the first generation of black people in American who can afford to be this open. (Gates, 109)

It is significant that I am about the same age as Henry Louis Gates. Although I have wrestled with opening the black world to the other worlds in our country for decades, I find that the reluctance to lift the veil on family secrets is as strong as ever, and it doesn’t exist only

among older people. Unfortunately, it doesn't exist only outside of me. It is so ingrained in us that it functions as a kind of inner censor.

This is the internal censor that black writers have always lived with. By internal, I don't mean individual internal (though it is internalized that way), but ethnically internalized, because it has been internalized within the culture. (Gates, 115)

Until I wrote the essays in this collection, especially "And He Called Me Miss Lady," I had not tried to describe my childhood home in writing. It had simply been something private that I talked about only in the most general and vague way. But when I sat down to make myself fill in those outlines with details, colors, smells, sounds and sights of my youth, I realized how effectively my ethnic internal censor had done its job.

The world of my childhood has been buried so long in the background of my consciousness, much effort was required to resurrect that world so I could begin to figure out how to "fashion a text" about it. Summoning memories of a world that so few people have ever written about in any kind of detail was a sort of research for me. "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein," Zora Neale Hurston, (Hurston, Modern American Memoirs, 390). The same can be said of memoiristic writing. It is poking and prying purposefully into one's own mind, into one's own past. It is seeking that one may know the cosmic secrets of the world through the secret lessons of one's life laid bare on a printed page.

The chore for these black generations who "can afford to be open" is to create accurate and beautiful portraits of black culture. For me, this task was as intrinsic to my memoirs as writing about my childhood. I couldn't see any way it would be possible to separate the segregated world in which I grew up from the rest of my story. The task provides an opportunity

to draw a picture of a harsh world softened by a kind of nostalgia. I don't want things to return to the way they were for all of us in the 1950s, but, in these memoirs, I want to honor the affections and the simple joys I found in that world. I consciously chose to keep many of the sensibilities I learned as a child in my all-black world, even as I learned to appreciate a much wider variety of art, music, and cultures.

In much more abbreviated form, I set out in these essays to try to talk about a black world in which there were very few white people. The way my mom talked to me at home was totally different from the way she spoke when she went on job interviews. My grandmother's speech, learned in early twentieth century South Carolina, was different from my mom's. My grandmother worked to eliminate some of the inflections she had assimilated as a girl when she wanted to better her lot in life. There is no real black dialect in my essays, but there is a tinge of something that reveals the signature of black language and ethnic identity. Gates says, "Sometimes it's the nuance of thought; sometimes it's the accent; sometimes it's whether the 'ings' are pronounced; sometimes it's how much vulgarity or vernacular is being used." (Gates, 109-110)

There is also little overt reference to race relations or white people in these childhood stories. Rather than long, preachy passages about segregation, the true subject to me was capturing what life was like for a little girl growing up in a separate society. The things I thought were special – a book, a trip to the zoo – would probably not have been so special to white middle class children who had access to so much more, yet they had such impact on my emotional makeup, I can't forget. The adults around me were striving to give their children what they could without much help from the outside world.

As I wrote these essays, one thing I realized was that black people had done some strange things to me. Not all their behaviors and actions were entirely their fault because they were probably suffering from mental illnesses. Ethnic minority and poor communities tend to look at mental illness differently from white middle class and affluent communities. Those who were mentally ill were often not even acknowledged as being sick. They were simply among the general population, perhaps a little different but accepted like most other people around the neighborhood. Frank McCourt saw this during his childhood in Ireland:

But when I sat down to scribble things, what was staring me in the face was the reality of being Irish, and that was the last thing I wanted to write about – the horror of the poverty all around us and the characters all round us in Limerick. Madmen. People walked in the streets who would have been locked up in any other civilization. But we thought they were touched – touched by God, touched by grace. (McCourt, 67-68)

I do not recall ever mistaking my grandmother for someone touched by God or grace, but I do remember being very much aware that her behavior wasn't normal. I was ashamed of her, and I didn't know that she couldn't help doing or saying the things she did. I couldn't talk to anyone about her, especially to any of the white kids I met in high school. No one knew about our government commodity food or our welfare checks except for people who lived very close to us. I was too embarrassed to talk to my friends or anyone else about being poor or having a weird grandmother until I was well into my 30s. Again McCourt's words reflect my feelings, struggle and experience perfectly: "...I'm quite sure I didn't want to write about growing up in the slum in Limerick. Nobody coming out of that miserable childhood would; you can't write about that kind of childhood until you're mature enough, until you have some self-esteem." (McCourt, 63)

Now, at the age of 52, with some professional and personal success in my life, I am working almost as hard to write about my childhood as I sometimes used to do to force my memories to go away until I could deal with them. It is not easy to tell a story that has been

repressed not only by external pressures, but internal ones as well, yet this is a job that must be done if our picture of the world if our multi-ethnic quilt is to be complete. More damage was done in the past by exclusion of cultures in our history than can ever be covered in the scope of this preface. Those of us who are concerned about inclusion have to take the responsibility for telling stories that only we can tell. We cannot expect others to empathize with our group histories unless we divulge what those histories are, no matter how embarrassing and uncomfortable telling may be at the outset. I find that the more I talk or write about my past, the more willing people are to look at me as a person who really has something to contribute. I find that as I acknowledge that my ideas derive from my history as a poor black girl, the less shame I feel and the more pride I gain as a survivor. My commitment to changing the world in some minuscule way also nourishes me to the point that my shame is dissipating. I gain strength through excising secrets. I am happy that I have chosen in writing memoiristic essays to contribute to “telling a new collective history”(Gates, 111) of my people.

Sistah Power

In her book, Your Life as Story: Discovering the ‘New Autobiography’ and Writing Memoir as Literature, Tristine Rainer offers a brief history of autobiography and memoir. She says they began as inscriptions in tombs as early as 3000 B.C. in Egypt. These inscriptions were all hyperbolic praise of the great deeds of the dead personages in the tombs. Even in those days, there were differences in the ways women wrote about their lives and the ways men wrote about theirs. Feminist scholar Estelle Jelinek has said that women’s writing tends to be more personal, subjective and nonlinear than men’s. These differences she believes are apparent in the first extant autobiography by a woman, Ahuri, the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh. (Rainer, 21-22)

According to Rainer, Ahuri's autobiography contained some of the hallmarks of modern memoir. "What I find particularly interesting about Ahuri's autobiography is that it is the first to have introduced fiction into the form," Rainer wrote. Ahuri used flashbacks and the fictitious device of telling her story as if she has already died and is remembering her life. The account was written in first person. "In her text, Ahuri admits that, like most Egyptian women, she has not been taught how to write, so we must assume she dictated her autobiography or used a ghostwriter." (Rainer, 22)

Apparently, Ahuri started something that is still inherent in women's accounts of their lives, including my own accounts in this collection. My essays are segments of my life arranged around certain central ideas or themes. I have an examination of my relationship with my absent father and its impact on my life in "Dream Daddy," my grandmother's and mother's tumultuous relationship in "Mothers Day," my changing understanding of my place in the scheme of things and family in "And He Called me Miss Lady." In "Never Out of Journalism" I write about what it is like to leave an extremely close-knit and often misunderstood profession for a new one with a different code and values. "Fear of a Flag" is about patriotism and flag-waving.

Feminist scholars have proposed several explanations for this lack of linear structure in women's memoir. Rainer surmises the lack of a linear structure in women's memoir arises from the lack of linear structure in women's lives. So much that has happened to women has not been theirs to control. Women were not encouraged to choose one career and to pursue it on a direct trajectory. Taking time to have babies and care for husbands and partners has also disrupted any attempt at a life that follows the straight line to success. Rainer said women's "desire lines were often interrupted, shattered or bifurcated." (Rainer, 7)

Rainer points out that in the past, African American women were more successful at memoir than white women. African American women's autobiographic writings go back to Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself by Harriet 'Linda Brent' Jacobs and published in 1861. They also include the spiritual autobiographies of black women preachers and modern political memoirs and life stories, such as Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. (Rainer, 96) I believe that any disparity between black women memoirists and white ones is probably due to the same kinds of factors that propelled black women into the workforce while white ones were encouraged to stay at home. It has always been our lot to work and do things for ourselves. In slavery, we never knew from one day to the next whether we would have a family to take care of, and, even after slavery, we were always expected to work harder taking care of white families than our own. My grandmother, who figures so prominently in my life, supported her children during the Depression by working as a live-in nanny to white children. She saw her white charges five days a week and her own children only two days a week. She still has a picture of one of the little white girls she cared for and loved.

White women stayed at home after they started their families, so the extremely limited options foisted upon black women by the white power structure seemed to have a sort of veneer of self-reliance. I don't believe it is possible to write a good memoir without a sense of self and a sense of independence. A memoir, after all, is one's own version of events in one's life told in the way that one chooses. It is a way writers can *resee* their lives. But women have not written memoirs and autobiographies in the same numbers as men. "Traditionally, there has been only one female autobiography for every eight written by a male." (Ker Conway, 47)

It is unfortunate that women were not encouraged to pursue their dreams and take charge of their lives on their own terms. When I was in my early 20s, employers were still refusing to

hire women who appeared to be on the verge of marriage, and banks were hesitant to give mortgages to couples based on consideration of both partners' incomes. A friend of mine had to give her mortgage holder medical evidence that she would not be having children before the financial institution approved her income, which was higher than her husband's. I graduated from college and went to job interviews where potential employers, both male and female, questioned me closely about whether I had a boyfriend. Their conclusions were that if I had a boyfriend, I was going to marry him, and it would be a waste of company resources to train me only to have me leave. If I didn't have a fiancé, then I was pretty enough to get one and, again, it would be a waste to train me.

I believe that adversity creates opportunities for perseverance and ingenuity. If, as these scholars say, the nonlinear method of memoir writing was invented because women's lives were nonlinear, the adversity has yielded a rich trove of storytelling techniques for all memoirists, who have come to recognize that the linear method of telling the story of one's life might not be as exciting and artistic as the nonlinear one favored by women.

It was and is a feminist act for women to write their memoirs because they are taking responsibility for their lives and shaping their lives on paper. We make ourselves the protagonists in our own narratives. "By definition the protagonist is the character who drives the story, whose desires, conflicts, and choices *are* the story." (Rainer, 141) It was my decision to get an education, have children and pursue a career. It was my mother's decision not to be the same kind of abuser that her own mother had been, and so she equipped me to live a better life than she did. Writing memoirs carries this role of taking active charge of one's life. I made. As Rainer says, "Seeing yourself as the protagonist of your life, you look for your responsibility in the story your life makes, rather than seeing it as having 'happened to you.'" (Rainer, 141)

I don't think it takes a great leap of imagination to understand why some of the most important African American women's memoirs were acts of rebellion against a system that oppressed them and their men and their children. Slave narratives were memoirs with a purpose. When Sojourner Truth challenged a white man from her podium with a brief account of the labor she had done and demanded "And ain't I a woman, too?" she was giving a brief story of her life that focused not on romance and family, but on work.

As I sat down to write the essays in this collection, I decided I did not want to focus for too long a time on my romantic life. I wanted to look at the relationships that were once and still are the root of my existence and explore the impact the absence of my father throughout my growing up years had on my choices and my life. Departing the story of love, I travel closer to my father. Although women have always been encouraged to find happiness in marriage with the right man, they must settle accounts with family first.

The focus of women's memoir was of great concern to Jill Ker Conway when she wrote The Road from Coorain about her family's life in Australia. She decided on a memoir that excised "the archetypal life plot for women in Western society" of "bourgeois romance." For her, and for me, the romantic archetype doesn't pay enough attention to some prime motivations in our lives – work and intellectual life. She sought to "narrate a life story of a woman that would pay due respect to her attachments to men and to family but would be about something else entirely." (Ker Conway, 45)

I have two sons in their twenties, and I did not want to write something that would cause undue stress or pain to them. They know the stories of my relationships with their fathers, have drawn their own conclusions about their dads, and moved on as healthy people.

In taking my focus away from romances, I gained insights, some sudden and surprising, that I had not had before. It was a most empowering and feminist exercise to examine my own life in this way.

Ker Conway ended her memoir with departure from Australia to go out into the world to seek an education and a life. Although I don't have an essay that I chose to end on that note, I know it was crucial for me to leave Cincinnati. For me and so many other black women and men, leaving poor black communities was the way to seek success. To imagine, to consider leaving home, was in itself an act of self-esteem, will and daring. "I knew that I lived in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked-off. Yet I felt that I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive. (Wright, 182)

My life has been marked by a tension created by familial obligations, to my mother and grandmother and to my husbands and children. Although I had a successful career in the male-dominated journalistic profession, I was always pulled by responsibility to my children, whom I put ahead of my career. I don't think that women can escape questions of priority of career and of family in their lives. I hope that as more men take more responsibility as fathers, husbands and sons more seriously than their careers, they will share some of the burden and empathize with what women have borne.

What Next?

As I look forward to old age, I feel in my soul the words of Zora Neale Hurston, at the end of her memoir, Dust Tracks on a Road:

Well, that is the way things stand up to now, I can look back and see sharp shadows, high lights, and smudgy inbetweens. I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands. (Hurston, 205)

I want the next chapters in my life to remain true to the spirit of memoir. I am the protagonist in my own story; I am the survivor and victor over my past. I feel I have a personal responsibility to people I see struggling to make themselves effective protagonists in their life stories. I hope I will inspire some to ask themselves what they want out of life, and once they have determined that, how to begin to work toward getting it. I know that part of fulfilling this goal will involve my change from journalism to teaching in universities. I also plan to incorporate that approach to life in my work as an anthropologist and as a writer. I cannot see myself giving up the pen. Someday, I hope I will also be a grandmother, and I hope I will teach my granddaughters and grandsons some of the lessons of my life.

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PART II

ESSAYS

Dream Daddy

Lush countryside. Rolling hills. Trees. A stream runs through it. Sometime in the 1800s. Farm complex, but no one actually does farm work. Everything is shrouded in a smoky, gauzy smog. (See effect in dream sequences of "All My Children.") House in foreground is not huge, but roomy and comfortable.

YOUNG HERO (looking off into the distance at a young woman while just plain looking dashing. I know she is me.): She's beautiful.

The couple meets. The YOUNG HERO and the YOUNG WOMAN connect instantly. Their faces are indistinct, yet it is absolutely clear they are attractive people with strong feelings toward each other. They clasp hands and have a courtship in lightning time. They remain fully clothed, don't exactly have sex, but the young woman becomes pregnant. As she has her baby in the house, the young hero paces outside.

The young woman rushes out of the house, still slim. (Easy for her. She never got big with the baby, and she can be in labor without pain or sweating.) She runs straight to the hero, takes his hands and looks into his face searchingly.

YOUNG WOMAN: Would you please love me?

*****CUT! CUT! CUT! CUT! CUT!*****

DIRECTOR (off screen): That's not the right dialogue, dammit! Don't say that!

YOUNG WOMAN (to hero, ignoring director): Would you please love me?

DIRECTOR: Stop the scene! Stop the scene!

I turn over and look at the alarm clock. It hasn't gone off yet, but I'm awake now. If I go back to sleep, I might have that dream again. It always goes this way. The hero can be white,

black, futuristic, out of the past, a contemporary, a movie star, but every damn time, the young woman (who is just as protean as the hero, and always me) looks at him at some incongruous moment and says imploringly “Would you please love me?”

Daddy was trying to let me have a good time on my vacation. I wanted to go to the zoo, so he took me three times in one week! The main attraction for me was the giant tortoises. I loved riding those things. They moved so slowly, they didn’t scare me at all. Actually, it was a huge feat for one of them to move at all. I didn’t even think they were ugly with their brown pebbly legs and their huge shells that were smooth against my legs as I straddled them, pretending they moved much faster than they did. I knew a tortoise could grow to be incredibly old. But I had no idea how old the ones I rode were.

As I rode or sat, daddy would watch or look at something else that caught his eye in the park. He sort of half-smiled as if my antics were mildly amusing and sort of odd. I always remember him leaning against the chain link fence near the sandy tortoise enclosure in the Toledo Zoo. The outing could not have been nearly as fascinating or exciting for daddy watching me as it was for me, a little golden brown Annie Oakley, riding a steed that moved in slow motion.

He is always with me, affecting many things that I do, certainly controlling my relationships with men, without a spoken word. He is the focus of a million questions that will never be answered. I am a very curious person.

I have been married twice and in love, or thought I was in love, several times, yet he has hurt me more than any man ever has, and I suspect more than any man ever will. I know this because it has been 44 years and counting since he left me, and I still feel the pain.

My daddy was a short, round, bandy-legged man. When I remember him, I think of his face as being moon-shaped. It was round and yellowish looking and not very expressive. I never knew him well enough to learn how his expressions changed with his feelings. He smelled of the cigars he used to chew on, making them wet and nasty with saliva. In my mind's eye, he was always wearing khaki, khaki pants and khaki shirts with short sleeves for summer. I cannot remember ever seeing him in the winter. If I try really hard, kind of the mental equivalent of reaching for the object that's just beyond reach, I can sort of hear his voice.

When I was around him, I was curiously tense and watchful. From the time I was a toddler until I was six years old, I didn't see him. Then, my parents talked, and suddenly, he showed up one day. He had driven from his home in Toledo to Cincinnati to take me to a fancy hotel downtown for a birthday dinner. It was the first time I had peppermint ice cream. Then we went to a store and daddy told me I could have anything I wanted. I chose the Mickey Mouse Club Annual because I loved "The Mickey Mouse Club Show," and I knew mom probably couldn't afford it.

I didn't see dad for another year. This time, my parents talked and worked it out so I could go to Toledo with daddy. I was excited, but I felt as if I had to be on my best behavior. If I got into trouble, daddy might not come to see me any more. I behaved as carefully and correctly as I could. If daddy sounded the least bit irritated, I was afraid I had messed up everything. I remember kissing daddy a few times, but he wasn't an effusive person. My mom couldn't get enough of my hugs and kisses, but my daddy was more reserved. When I was with daddy, I was

like a little robot holding in most of my childish energy and mischief until I was safely home in Cincinnati where my momma knew all my tricks and loved me anyway.

The final vacation was the trip we took when I was eight. Daddy and I rode the train to Toledo, a trip of about 200 miles one-way. He wanted me to do something different, and riding the train was different all right. Instead of falling asleep as I usually did when daddy drove, I was determined to stay awake every minute and act like a grown-up. I was successful at both until we had to go to another car to eat. We stepped outside our car into the roaring air and the noise of the wheels clacking down the track. I was supposed to step across the joint between cars as they swayed. My daddy did it as if he was walking along the sidewalk. I panicked. I just could not do that by myself. Daddy got a little irritated. He finally came back, picked me up and carried me across the gap between the cars. When we got back to our seats and sat down, he was quiet. I felt as if I had failed at something and ruined the whole ride for him.

But I still had fun on that trip. With daddy and his new wife and their baby, I went to Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Daddy and I spent the whole day in the Nation's Capital, visiting the White House, going to the top of the Washington Monument, and walking up and down the Mall. When we went to the Lincoln Monument, a white man who said he was a magazine photographer, paid my dad a few bucks to allow him to take my picture looking up at the giant statue of Lincoln. I still wonder where that photo of a little black girl looking up at the Great Emancipator ended up. At the end of three weeks, daddy drove me back to Cincinnati. It was the longest time we ever spent together that I can remember. I was expecting to see my daddy every summer, but that wasn't to be.

Much of what I know about my dad and me are little stories that my mom told me, but my parents had been divorced for a while before she told me the stories about him. I think she was a biased source. In her stories, he always came off as being a little inept and too disinterested in parenting to learn to do better.

There were two little stories that she liked best.

One began with everyone gathered at the hospital for the occasion of my birth and arguing about what to name me. It was important because I was the first grandchild for both sides. My mom's mother wanted Linda Susan; because it was the whitest sounding thing she could think of. My dad's parents wanted variations on his name, Charles. Since I was a girl, I think their top pick was Charlesetta. Lord, am I glad my grandparents lost that fight!

My momma had created Starita for me, and she was fighting this horde of loud and obnoxious people for her right to name her own child. Daddy backed her up for a while, but the whole thing became too much for him. Mom said he threw up his hands and said, "I don't care what you name her as long as it's not Josie Mae!"

Here's another one I grew up with.

Daddy and mom had just brought me home from the hospital, and he volunteered to change my diaper. While he was in that critical used-diaper-off-no-fresh-one-in-sight stage, I urinated "two drops" on his hand.

Daddy said, "it's alright, it's alright."

My parents had married within a month after my mom graduated from high school.

My mom was only 18 and had grown up in foster homes and her mother's apartments in Depression era Cincinnati. At the time she married my dad, mom's family lived in public

housing in the blackest, poorest part of town. My dad was a year older than my mom. He was a paratrooper in the Army's famous all-black 555th or Triple Nickel unit. In their wedding pictures, my mom looked like a pretty 15-year-old about to be confirmed in her white dress and veil, and my daddy looked like a grown man in his wool paratrooper's uniform with the pants stuffed into his combat boots. They seemed almost dwarfed by the stained glass, statues and soaring ceilings of the old Catholic church.

Daddy was stationed in the South somewhere, and mom remained in their apartment in Cincinnati, happily getting things ready for his return. She took the money he sent home to her and bought enough furniture to fill four rooms without telling him. She thought it was a great surprise that showed off her decorating and money management skills. I wonder what he thought when he came home, and all the money he had sent her was tied up in furniture he had never seen before.

Mom had me when she was 19, almost 20. She said immediately daddy changed toward her. He wanted her to wear matronly nightgowns and did not find her as sexy as before she became someone's mother. She didn't have any sense of herself as an attractive woman, and so this abrupt change was totally devastating for her. It was only one of their miscalculations as they tried to take on adult roles for which neither of them was ready. Mom tried to be perfect. Dad tried to assert his dominance over her.

One night he went out drinking, came home and crawled into bed with mom, who wasn't receptive to a drunken lover. He got angry and hit her. She reached for the giant, heavy hurricane lamp on the bedside table and broke it over his head. She said he never tried that again. (Women in my family have our problems with men, but beatings are rarely one of them!)

The divorce came when I was three years old. My dad took his second wife and their toddler and left Ohio when I was eight years old.

Even after daddy left, Grandpa Smith would come to see my mom and me from time to time. On my ninth birthday we greeted him heartily. I was excited because he said he had a surprise for me. I hoped it wasn't a dirty old ten-dollar bill to press in mom's hand. That's what he usually did when he came to visit, and she always needed the money to feed us. I climbed up into his arms and gave his stubble-covered, weathered cheek a kiss. Kissing Grandpa Smith was like kissing sandpaper every single time. I had to work up to it, but I loved him anyway.

"Now this is a music box, but it has a surprise," he said.

The thing looked like a metal pie, the kind with a top crust as well as a bottom one. I wound the handle and a familiar nursery tune, something about "four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie," played. At the end when the pie was opened and the birds began to sing, 24 blackbirds popped up out of the pie. It was the ugliest toy I had ever seen. The birds were creepy and obscene looking, but I loved it because it was ugly.

Everybody was laughing and having a good time until I asked the question.

"Do you ever hear from my daddy?"

"Uh, uh, I haven't talked to him in a long time," Grandpa said. I knew momma was listening to every word. I had asked her about this before grandpa showed up. She had said if I asked, maybe grandpa would tell me something about daddy, but she was sure he wouldn't tell her anything.

"Is he okay? Is my baby brother okay? Is Vicky okay?"

Vicky was daddy's second wife.

Grandpa was looking upset and uncomfortable. Mom stared at him.

“The last I heard, they were fine, honey, all fine.”

The answer was always the same, vague but weakly reassuring. I never stopped asking the question.

My momma worried about me. Here was a hurt that she could not heal. I was always aware that my dad was gone, and he had another family. Her father, my Grandpa Carter told me I could call him daddy, but it wasn't enough. I couldn't help wondering about so many things.

I still don't remember how I realized that daddy had left me. I don't remember mom telling me that dad was gone forever. I don't remember any letter or telephone call. Mom tried to contact dad and found he was no longer at the address she had, and his telephone was disconnected. Grandpa said he didn't know where daddy and his family were.

I plummeted into a depression. I lay in my twin bed in our three-room fourth floor walk-up apartment in the projects crying myself to sleep every night. The sense of grief and loss was like a black hole in the center of my being. I didn't want to play. I didn't want to have fun. If I could have, I would have driven myself to Toledo to walk the streets looking for my father. I remember wondering how my daddy could leave me right after we had spent time together: he knew I was a good little girl: and he had been so good to me. I grieved over losing my brother, too. I had wanted to be a big sister like other kids, and when I met my half-brother, finally I was a big sister. When I visited daddy, I rolled the baby around in his stroller for hours. And daddy's new wife was nice to me, too. She baked my favorite spice cake for me and treated me like I was her little girl.

Was it easier for him to leave me because I was a girl, and now he had a boy? The one time I had been with both Grandpa Smith and my daddy came after I begged to go with them to grandpa's neighborhood. As we strolled down the street, old people sitting on their front porches greeted Grandpa Smith by name and seemed to know who my daddy was, too. They didn't know me. After a while, I felt they didn't even see me. One after another, they said almost the same thing.

"Hello Mr. Smith. That's your son Charles? And that's your grandson! Oh, oh, what a beautiful baby. I see you have someone to carry on the family name, now!"

Family name? Smith? At least a million people have that name. That's not such a big deal, I thought ruefully.

Yet, years later after I grew up, embraced feminism and divorced my second husband, I took back the family name. I've decided I'm going to stick with Smith for the rest of my life.

Two failed marriages by the time I was 28 left me in a kind of shock. I seized on reverting to my family name because by then, it was all I could claim of my father and I had been taught that any piece of driftwood in a choppy sea might help keep you afloat.

I was embarking on a career as a newspaper reporter, and I wanted my father to recognize my name if ever he saw it in print. I had tried to find him time and time again over the years. His father had died when I was a college freshman, and with my grandfather went any link, no matter how tenuous, to my father. After I got married and had my first child, a little boy, I wanted my father to know that now he was a grandfather. I was overwhelmed by my need to tell him. I imagined how proud my daddy might have been of a little boy, and I wanted my male child to

know all his male relatives. I wrote letters to the Veterans and Social Security administrations, but nothing came of them. I lost hope that I would ever see my father again.

I've always felt totally unsure around men. I either tried too hard or I couldn't figure out that a man was showing interest in me. Only the most blatant flirting penetrated my clueless exterior because I didn't have confidence that men found me attractive. I wouldn't go to bars to meet men, but I still ended up dating the social equivalent of lounge lizards. I was always tense when I was with a man, just as I had been when I had decided as a child that I had to be perfect to stay in daddy's good graces. I worked on the man and the relationship as if labor would guarantee success. I cooked large delicious meals, made outlandish gifts, smiled my brightest and bought enough lacy sexy lingerie and negligees to keep Victoria's Secret in business. Mainly, I succeeded in feeling unappreciated because the men could never be grateful enough for my efforts or tell me enough times that they loved me.

Every year, I had a summer boyfriend, and I thought I was hot. I knew I deserved whatever compliments each man dished out during that brief annual blooming period. I was special in a brittle, temporary way. The more frantic and frenzied the relationship, the more real it seemed to me. I had not yet realized that love that lasts doesn't have to jam all the good stuff into six weeks. And I never realized that every year, I was duplicating my childhood experience of having a man in my life who seemed to love me, treated me to fun and attention, only to be gone long before fall.

I gravitated toward men who sold me short because that's what I expected. I had a very dim view of the prospects for decent treatment from men. They just couldn't be trusted. Still, I

pretended I was optimistic. My friends would question my sudden passions for this boyfriend or that one, and I would rationalize their warnings away.

The fear was the worst part of the cycle. It didn't matter how sorry an excuse for a mate the man was, I couldn't bear the thought of failing to keep him. I even talked myself into trying to please the man who raped me while we were on a date. He was a criminal and a womanizer of the worst sort, yet I was sure I could find the good in him. I thought that if I couldn't make even this lowlife love me, then there was really something wrong with me.

I don't know exactly when I started having those dreams in which I was constantly asking men "Would you please love me?" They just started arriving in the night. I thought they were romantic fantasies. If a guy flirted with me, he would show up at night in my sleep, and I would ask him that question. It didn't matter that neither of us looked as we did in real life; I would always know who we were in the dream. Sometimes, I would manipulate the outcome so the guy either avoided answering or embraced me (an implied affirmative answer). Now, I stop the dream and tell myself not to ask the question.

It has taken me most of my life to realize that the men in these dreams are just stand-ins for my dad, and I am really a little girl in those dreams. That was the hard part of the equation to figure out. Then just like a math problem, I plugged in the numbers, did the arithmetic and got the answer:

"Would you please love me?"

"No, I can't."

Whether one believes in premonitions or not, there was something oddly prescient about the next time I heard from my dad's side of my family. I had been at my first newspaper job as a reporter in Gary, Indiana for about a year. One of those summer romances had yielded a false engagement. False because my boyfriend had never intended to give up the woman he had been going with for several years. How he planned to marry me and keep living with her and her daughter, I don't know, but his reasoning could be hard to follow at times.

The engagement was false, but the little boy I had as a result of the relationship was real and beautiful and wonderful. Now, my small reporter's salary had to support two boys and myself, and it was difficult. Once again, I thought about my daddy being the grandfather of two and not even knowing it. I wondered whether it would make any difference to him, and if he would want me back in his life if he knew. It was a thought that slighted me, I knew, but I still couldn't help but ask that question.

One day as I was sitting at my desk in the newsroom, the telephone rang.

"Hello, may I speak to Starita Smith," said a pleasant older woman's voice.

"This is she," I said, as I did several times a day.

"Are you Starita Smith who is related to Charles Thomas Smith?"

Immediately, I was catapulted out of my reporter's ennui. No one ever asked me if I was my father's daughter.

"Yes," I said, floored and nonplussed.

"I'm your cousin, your daddy's cousin Lucille Johnson. My husband's name is Howard Johnson, just like the motel," she said with a slight chuckle.

I started to say something, but I could tell the lady was trying to get to a point.

“Honey, I am so sorry to tell you this. I don’t know how to tell you this, but your father died yesterday.”

I went numb. I felt frozen like a character in a movie special effect. I heard what the lady said, but I went somewhere else in my consciousness.

“What,” I said without even enough energy to put the question mark on the question.

“He died at his home in Detroit. He walked in the door and he collapsed,” she said.

I said something, but I didn’t know what it was.

The kindly lady continued.

“Charles used to come visit us here in Gary, and he saw your name in the newspaper, and he said, ‘I know that’s my daughter!’ He was so proud. I asked him why he didn’t just call you up. He always said he would, but he never did, and I don’t know why not. I told him ‘you need to call that child.’”

I could not speak after she told me that.

“I really think he wanted to call you. I know that he should have, but now it’s too late. I’m so sorry, baby.”

I sat flattened to my chair. We exchanged pleasantries and got off the telephone. I sprinted into the ladies’ room where a friend found me frozen. As I talked to her, I began to cry.

My father was 51 years old when he died of a heart attack.

That was more than 20 years ago. I have reconnected with my baby brother, now a man in his 40s, and our younger brother, whom I did not meet until he was in his 30s. My stepmother and I have even worked on developing a tender relationship. She likes being a grandmother to my sons.

She took it upon herself to find out how things had gone so wrong when I was eight years old and lost my father. At that time, she had wanted my father to press for custody of me, because she wanted me to be her little girl. She and dad had more money than my mom, and she thought they might provide a better home for me than my mom. At the time, she didn't realize that I was all my mom had, and mom would have died rather than give me up. She also didn't know that my momma's mother could street fight with the best of them – down, low, ruthless and totally unscrupulous – to keep me away from a male, even my own father. And she didn't know that I would have died rather than leave my momma.

But my dad realized what kind of trouble he would be in for if he tried to get me. He also didn't want to keep saying no to his persistent wife. He lied to my stepmom and said my mom had moved without telling him where she was. Then he took the new family to California. Over the years, my grandfather kept an eye on me and kept my father's secrets. I imagine that whenever my grandfather came up with ten dollars so my mom could feed us or took me on a shopping trip for school clothes, it was really my daddy's money he was spending. When I graduated from the college preparatory high school in Cincinnati, my dad was so proud, he slipped and told his wife that I was graduating. He asked her if she thought he should send me \$50 as a graduation present. She raged at him.

"Fifty dollars! Fifty dollars is nothing! You should give her all the love you kept from her all these years!" she shouted in anger. She told me that was the end of any discussion between them of my situation.

But my grandfather called me the summer after I graduated and said he had a present for me. I was excited, and I loved my grandfather, but I was also a teenager who rode buses. I went

downtown on an errand and ended up missing my bus. I got home too late to see my grandfather, but the graduation card with a \$50 bill was waiting for me.

The card he left is the last thing I ever received from my Grandpa Smith. He died while I was away at college.

My stepmom must have harbored suspicions about my father for the rest of daddy's life. Years after daddy died, and she and I reunited, she took it upon herself to find out exactly what had happened when I was a little girl. She relentlessly asked his brothers and sisters questions. She found out that one of his brothers and his sister hatched a plan with him to sever daddy's and momma's relationship entirely. They suspected mom of some sort of vague nefarious scheme that might have jeopardized his new family. Their plan worked.

The things she learned upset my stepmother. She has told me over and over again that she had not known what daddy had done. I believe her with all my heart.

I try to make peace with my father's memory, but I can't. I don't understand how he could have done the things he did. I feel self-righteous. My inner judge has ruled him guilty. If I had a child I knew about anywhere, I would never let anything keep me from my child. If I had a loyal spouse, I would never lie to her about something as important as my first family or the real reason why we were moving across the country.

I try not to dwell on daddy for long because for most of my adult life, I have been raising sons alone. I couldn't afford to get lost in my own rage and disappointment. I protected my sons from parts of myself I believed would be corrosive to them. I knew that if I created around my boys an atmosphere of anger at all men, I would damage them. I knew I had to believe that there are many men who are trustworthy, gentle and caring if I wanted to raise that kind of man. I

wanted my sons to grow up to be loving, responsible and conscientious fathers. I wanted to raise good, healthy, decent men.

Now that they are grown, my sons are teaching me and healing me, because they are good, decent men. They are showing me up-close the kind of men who have been absent much of my life. I have new faith that more good men exist than I ever thought. I have found male relatives, my half-brothers and male friends whom I don't need to ask the question from my dreams. I know they love me just as I am.

It has been a long time coming.

Mother's Day

My grandmother has summoned me to come to her apartment to brush her hair and scratch her scalp. It is a kind of pampering that she has loved since I was a little girl, but I'm 18 now and planning to leave Cincinnati to go to college in Tennessee, where I want to study Spanish. I have even started talking about going to Spain to study for a while, although I know Europe is a long shot because I have so little money. Soon as we get settled, my grandmother on the floor and me on a cushiony chair behind her, it becomes obvious that my grandmother has an ulterior motive for summoning me. The whole time I am caring for her hair – and it must be done a certain way that takes at least an hour – she tries her best to kill my dream.

"Listen, Rita, you don't want to go to Europe. I know you don't like us telling you what to do all the time," she says, trying to make it sound as if my mom is in with her in whatever she's going to do next, and as if she is being conciliatory. "You don't know what it's really like over there. They do some awful things over there. They always want to do, you know sexual things, bad sexual things to American girls."

I feel nauseous. I know this conversation is going in a bad direction. I try to head her off, sounding as fake conciliatory as she is.

"I don't think anything like that would happen to me."

But she continues for the better part of an hour.

"I read in a newspaper that when American girls go over there, they take 'em, and those men over there make those girls do anything. I read about some white girls that got sold into slavery. All these men raped them and their families couldn't even find out what happened to them. They made them go with a whole lot of men. You don't want something like that to happen to you. I don't know what I would do if that happened to you."

“Look, Mother,” I say, attempting to interrupt. “I don’t know if I’m going to go to Europe, anyway.”

“You’re a smart girl. I know you want to go.”

I try to protect my dream by not acknowledging it to her. She is starting a campaign that she will wage as long as she has to, and she will not be stopped.

“I read about it in the newspapers, too. But that’s not the only place I heard that,” she drones on with the worst outlandish sexual accusations she can think of. “They do bad sexual things in Europe. They even use their mouths. You know I can tell whenever anybody has done that, because their mouth looks different after they do it, especially women. I can tell right away just by looking at them.”

It is my grandmother’s technique when she makes threats. She won’t be the person who enforces the threat, but she is absolutely sure that someone else will do something horrible that involves voodoo spells, Catholics who have secret rituals, women who put potions and poisons in her sons’ food, violence, or most often, rape. And once she decides that these kinds of foul play are at hand, she will not stop talking about it. Every conversation, no matter how innocuous, will lead to a tirade or a litany of threats from outside the family or threats from within it, depending on her mood or her interests at the time. She believes sexual predators are everywhere. No matter what the circumstance, my grandmother can find a sexual threat. According to her, she has been a magnet for unreasonably lustful men and women, drawn by her abundant beauty and eternal sex appeal, for more than 90 years. Everyone else, even though much less blessed by nature than she, is nevertheless at-risk as well. Even babies aren’t safe.

Almost every day, she gave me some warning about men and boys wanting to rape. It never ends.

“I been so sick here lately,” she usually says nowadays.

“Have you been to the doctor?” I ask usually during my rare telephone calls.

“No, I don’t go to the doctors no more. Those doctors tried to get me in a room and take advantage of me. I told the nurses what they were trying to do back there. The doctor tried to act like he was surprised, but it’s no telling what he would have done to me. I’m not going back to that clinic again. I don’t trust doctors no more.”

She was 90 years old when she last accused a doctor of trying to seduce her, to do something sexual to her in the privacy of an examination room.

Now that she’s 95, I want her to see doctors frequently. Every few months or so, I ask if she has been to a doctor. Once again I hear the story of young doctors so attracted to her they risked everything to have sex with her in their clinic. I try to be patient, but it is really hard not to yell into the phone: “Get real! You’re mean! You’re cruel! You’re a crazy old bitch! Who the hell do you think wants you even on a good day!”

But I bite my tongue. I have usually bitten my tongue in the face of my grandmother’s ravings. My mom trained me to do that when I was a child, so until I became an adult, I was silent most of the time. And from my grandmother, I learned the power of language to wound, destroy and excoriate at about the same time I learned to walk. No wonder I’m a writer.

“You know you pushed her into that pipe!”

There is a slight smile curving the ends of her lips upward. It is not quite a sneer, far from a grin, almost undetectable, this expression she gets when she is on the verge of stirring up a big storm. My grandmother thrives on stirring up these storms. The best ones to her are when she gets my mom in hysterics. She remains controlled, whether she is yelling or screeching or insinuating while mom dissolves in to tears, trembling and loses all control. I watch. I am only 11, but I have already realized that my role in this recurring drama is to be my grandmother's weapon, as well as the audience both women attempt to manipulate. My grandmother wants me to be the witness she needs to authenticate her power. My mom wants someone to validate her and witness her pain and suffering. And because from my earliest days I have been a weapon and a witness, I grow up as an accomplice to both of them. I feel complicit in the abuse of my own momma, the person I love most in the world before I even have the power to leave the room without permission.

When the screaming and recriminations start, it is hard for me to know what to do. When I was seven, my grandmother rearranged some things in a closet and one of the lower shelves became empty. For awhile, I thought I had a haven. I loved to crawl on to the shelf, close the curtain and curl up in the dark. My own safe space. Tiny dark spaces felt good to me.

But now, I'm too big and the shelf is filled with clutter, anyway. I have no place to hide. I try turning off my hearing before things get unbearable.

"Mother, I did not!!!" mom's lips are trembling. She is so upset, she can hardly get the words out.

"You did, you did, you pushed her."

Grandmother has said too much. My mom stops crying and her voice becomes quiet and determined. She gives my grandmother a murderous, threatening look.

“I did not hurt my child,” she says slowly and quietly.

My mom used to say all the time, that “When I’m really the maddest, I get quiet.”

If only she would get quiet more often.

I have a four-inch scar on my left forearm resulting from a burn I suffered when I was only 11 months old. My mom and I were visiting my grandmother in her apartment in public housing, where vertical pipes that carried steam heat upward through the four-story building into the radiators in the apartments stood in the corners of each room. The pipes used to get so hot, it was uncomfortable to stand within a few feet of them. I was toddling around the living room and seared my arm on a hot pipe.

But when I was 11 years old, my grandmother decided to see if she could torment my mom and turn me against my mom with her accusation that mom had burned me on purpose. It was part of her strategy. My grandmother constantly probed for weaknesses in my mom. When she found a weakness, she worked on it like a boxer in the ring, but she gave up on this one because mom stood her ground for a change. My mom hardly ever seemed to put her dukes up to defend herself or me.

From the contours of the scar, I can tell it was a serious injury, mostly a third-degree burn. I, of course, have no conscious memory of the events of that day, but I am sure my mom did not burn me, neither woman has ever shown any propensity to inflict serious physical pain on children.

But, for some reason, something in me remembers being burned. I can scarcely iron a piece of clothing without getting a little burn somewhere. I love to cook, but I must be careful taking things out of the oven. What I used to think of as accidents, little first-degree burns on my

forearms, I suspect may not be so random or accidental. The abused hurt themselves in myriad ways long after the abuser stops inflicting pain. I look at my tiny burns and scars and wonder. Have they taken the place of the verbal abuse I endured for so long?

Fifty years after that first horrific burn, I leaned over a lamp, accidentally brushed up against the hot light bulb, and burned my arm in almost exactly the same place as I had as a baby. When I went to the doctor, everyone seemed to be freaked out by my wound, but I was oddly unmoved. The day it happened I had put a bandage on it and driven 80 miles round-trip to school. I didn't even seek medical care for it until several days after it happened. I sardonically thought of it as a strangely appropriate anniversary event. Even months after the new burn healed completely, a nurse saw the collage of scars on my arm and asked, "Honey, what happened to you?"

"No, don't you bother to come by here. She's not going with you. I'm gonna keep her. She wants to stay with me. Don't you want to stay with me, baby?"

At four, I can talk on the telephone, and I reach for it, but my grandmother keeps it. She grins at me as if we are playing a game. I put down my hands, and decide I don't like this game.

"Come get me mamma!" I want to yell into the telephone.

My grandmother looks at me, that strange not-quite smile on her face.

"No, I'm not gonna put her on the phone," she tells my mamma. "She don't want to talk to you. I'm gonna be her mamma now."

My mom loved me more than anything else in the world. I know that, not only because she told me so, but because my grandmother found I was the most effective weapon to use against her daughter, my mom.

The abuse had been going on since my mom's childhood. They carried on a strange kind of war with each other, and it was hell being in the line of fire.

The phone rings again, by now I am really scared that I will never see my momma again. I can't understand why my grandmother is acting like this. I am really, really mad at her. I don't like to see my momma get hurt, and I know my momma must be sad. I try to tell my grandmother this, but she won't listen. I'm only four, but I know she is getting something out of this fight, something weird, something that makes me start to hate her.

I sit dully on her old couch. Several times she attempts to hug me. Even though I usually like hugs and kisses, I won't to go to her. Every time, she picks up the phone and dials my mom's number at work again. My momma and daddy are divorced and he's gone far away. My grandmother baby-sits me while my momma works.

"Don't you bother to come here. I'm not giving her up. She's been begging me all day to keep her. She said she wants me to be her momma. Don't you come here. I'll call the police if you come over here with all your foolishness!"

I am dying inside. She is almost openly smiling again.

I am crying. She doesn't try to comfort me. To her, I am crying for the wrong reason, because I am begging to be with my momma.

A million things could have set my grandmother on the vicious path she chose.

My sisters and I have tried to figure it out, but we have far too little information with which to formulate any theories. We are sure something terrible happened to her when she was growing up in South Carolina. Her life before we were born is mainly a mystery to us. She hardly ever talked about her childhood. Once, she told me a story about her brother earning enough money to buy a bicycle, only to have to give it up when a white boy demanded it. Another story was about meeting her Cherokee grandmother when she was 14. The lady's hair was so long, it was fanned out around the chair on which the lady sat and scared my grandmother who had never seen anyone with that much hair.

Darkness falls. I know that momma should be coming to get me soon. I am afraid that she will not try to come and get me. She is so afraid of my grandmother, I am never sure when she will stand up for us.

My grandmother's three-room apartment is in a brick building. On every floor are three apartments with thick steel doors. Anyone who knocked on those strong doors, had to knock loudly, so loudly that some people didn't even use their knuckles, they tapped on the doors with their keys or something to make sure the people inside would hear them.

Sitting on my grandmother's couch, I hear a determined banging on the door. I know it's my momma. I am too scared to be happy that she has come for me.

My grandmother mutters something.

"Open the door, mother! Open the door! I want my baby! Give me my child!"

"She's gonna wake up the whole building!"

Suddenly, I am in my grandmother's arms and riding on her hip. Grandmother opens the door.

“You see this child. You ain’t gonna never get her back!”

I am crying, keening actually.

“Give me my baby!”

Mom reaches for me. I reach for her.

“Oh, no you don’t, you’re not getting in here!”

Grandmother tries to shut the door. Momma puts her foot in the crack and keeps it open.

Grandmother jerks me back.

Back and forth, they struggle over the door, grandmother pushing from the inside, momma pushing from the outside. Momma manages to get it open, and I reach for her, screaming and crying. My momma grabs me, and I wrap my arms around her neck, holding on for dear life, but my grandmother is still holding on to my legs with a good, strong grip. The heavy door swings to close with my body still suspended between the two women over the threshold. It nearly slams shut on me. Hard. My body is being torn apart.

I scream the peculiar high-pitched scream of an animal in pain.

Everything stops. Finally, they are afraid they are killing me.

My grandmother traveled from Spartanburg to Cincinnati by train alone when she was about 12 years old to live with her brother and his white wife, who was especially kind to her, she says. We have no idea why she was sent north. Other members of her family ended up in Cincinnati for various reasons. Two of her male relatives hopped a train after beating up a white man who was trying to molest sexually one of the girls in the family. For black men to fight for black women’s honor against a white man was a lynching crime in those days.

“That girl is past due to go to the doctor.”

“Mother, I’m not taking her to any doctor the way you took me when I was only 12,” my mom says angrily. “I wish you would quit talking about this stuff.”

“She’s pregnant. I know she is. You just won’t see the truth,” my grandmother says.

“If she really is pregnant, we’ll all know in a few months, won’t we?” mom says sarcastically.

For at least two months my grandmother keeps it up. She even tells relatives that I am pregnant. I am 13 years old, have only kissed a boy once for 10 seconds, and I am too shy to have a boyfriend. I don’t even know what intercourse is. I overhear only bits of the arguments and sense that my mom and grandmother have something new to fight about concerning me.

My mom tries to reassure me one day while we’re sitting on the back step of our apartment. She puts her arm around me.

“Mother keeps asking me to take you to the doctor for a female examination. She did that to me when I was 12 years old. I had never been near any boys, and I told her so, but she didn’t believe me. It was horrible to have that exam, but don’t worry I’m not going to do that to you.”

My heart sinks. Some things I don’t want to know. If I wasn’t going to get an exam, then why tell me about the whole mess? I appreciate my mom’s effort to protect me, but I feel as if she’s making a totally unnecessary play for me to love her instead of my grandmother. She never quite believes that I prefer her to my grandmother. I worry about this new situation, because I know how my grandmother spreads nasty gossip without caring whether it is true or not. I feel like everyone in the world is looking at me, waiting to see if I’m pregnant.

Grandmother keeps a large collection of family pictures, but only five of them are of members of her side of the family. One of them is a picture of her mother, whom my mother worshipped, standing next to a headstone. Grandmother's mother was black and looked like a life of hard work. The sadness in her face used to make me want to cry just looking at the picture, but my grandmother never talked much about her mother. The only story I know about her father was that he was working on a roof and was impaled on a pike of an iron fence. Grandmother never told me what kind of man he was. She can give an oral genealogy without names of her family back to an African girl who was kidnapped into slavery. Her family tree includes not only Africans, but also white slaveowners who raped the women and two or three Indians.

We know that two sources of her rage are color and bitter memories. Grandmother is almost the color of black coffee, but her own mother had been darker. In her day, grandmother was beautiful. In her pictures as a young woman, she looks like a gorgeously dressed model with great legs and a face that clearly shows both her Indian and African heritage. She has been a handsome woman for most of her life.

Mom was golden brown, and she, too, was beautiful. She was on the verge of joining the Katherine Dunham Dancers when she found out she was going to have me. She was smart and she could sing. She looked very much like her father, grandmother's ex-husband, and he looked like a golden-skinned movie star with the perfect body of an athlete.

My grandmother thinks that people with light skin are superior. When her favorite son ended up marrying a white woman and they had children, my grandmother was ecstatic. She would rhapsodize to us, her brown-skinned grandchildren, about her sweet, little pink and gold (hair, not skin) cherubs.

My grandmother hated it that her daughter would have everything that she had not had. Grandmother was a high school dropout, who didn't earn a diploma until she was 54. Mom made high grades at the finest college preparatory high school in the city.

During the Depression, grandmother supported her children as a live-in nanny. She called the white children angels. In the meanwhile, my mom, as early as age seven, cooked on a wood stove and kept house for five days at a time while my grandmother was away working.

When my mom's time came to work, she never had to be a nanny or a maid. With her cultured accent and neat appearance, she got receptionist and other jobs that black women could not get in those days. With each job, my grandmother's fury would erupt in an ugly scene that would cost mom the job. One time, grandmother went to my mom's office, threw a tantrum and tore mom's blouse off in front of the entire staff.

Mrs. Jones is sitting outside on the communal front steps of my grandmother's apartment building, minding her own business. She and my grandmother have been picking at each other for weeks. Every time we see Mrs. Jones, grandmother makes some remark or Mrs. Jones makes an ugly face, which isn't that hard for her to do. I just want to play in the front yard on my grandmother's side of the building. I can cook greens, and bake cakes by mixing water, or -- if I forget the water -- spit with the dirt to make my food. Twigs make the best spoons and forks. Sometimes a little girl who visits her grandmother in the building comes out to play with me. She can cook, too, and our food is always delicious. But my friend isn't around today.

My grandmother brings her chair out and sits on her side of the little stoop. I know this isn't really good. When I go up to ask her about something, she starts.

“Rita, you be careful around here, some people don’t know anything about keeping on their side of the step.”

“You better watch what you say, heifer,” tough Mrs. Jones answers.

A few minutes after I go back to baking one of my yummy cakes in the yard, I hear voices from the step.

“I told you I have just as much right to sit where I want as you do,” my grandmother is saying.

“You better watch your damn step. I don’t want to beat some old lady’s ass,” Mrs. Jones says. She is really looking angry now.

“Who you callin’ a old lady. I ain’t old. I don’t know how old you are, but I know I look younger than you. I ain’t all fat, and rough-lookin’ like you neither,” grandmother says. The not-quite smile plays on her lips, but when she looks at Mrs. Jones, she really looks mean.

The ladies keep on talking and getting madder and madder. I wish they would stop. Usually, we don’t stay outside this long, but today my grandmother seems to want to stay out here forever with this nasty lady.

Before I know what happens, somehow both women are standing on the patch of asphalt that extends beyond the front yard. My grandmother has a chair and somehow she has brushed up against Mrs. Jones with it.

“Heifer, I know you didn’t hit me!”

“Aw, I didn’t do nothin’ to you, stupid woman. You just imagined that I hit you. You so stupid you don’t know the difference between an accident and somebody tryin’ to fight you.”

They continue arguing loudly. A crowd is gathering around just like a bunch of children gathering on the schoolyard to watch a battle between classmates. My grandmother is saying

awful things to Mrs. Jones. I would have hit somebody who said those things to me, and Mrs. Jones was furious.

Just then my momma comes walking up the street, looking beautiful in a white blouse with a ruffle on it, a slim black skirt and black high heels. My grandmother shouts something mean at Mrs. Jones. All my momma can see over the crowd is Mrs. Jones taking a swing at my grandmother. That's all she needs to see.

"Don't you hit my mother!!" my momma screams and jumps into the fray.

"Get back mother, get back!" momma says as she and Mrs. Jones start flailing away. The crowd is going crazy. I am too. Everybody seems to have forgotten I'm even there. I'm scared that big, old, ugly, tough Mrs. Jones is going to beat up my little bow-legged momma. If anybody should be fighting, it should be my grandmother, she started the whole thing, picking and picking and picking away at Mrs. Jones. But momma is really fighting. I have never seen her like this.

Grandmother is just watching everything, the not-quite smile on her face.

Suddenly, two policemen push their way through the crowd and start ordering the women to stop and telling people to go home. I am still standing there screaming at the top of my lungs, my face covered with enough tears for a million of my special cakes. I am no longer saying words, I'm just screaming.

My grandmother finally notices me, but not until after they quickly haul my mom away in handcuffs.

Grandmother takes me upstairs and seems to sober up. She gets on the telephone and keeps calling people until she finds somebody to get momma out of jail. It is one of the few times I have seen her actually look scared and worried about my momma.

When I was 12, my mom made some major discoveries. She was going to a therapist who was helping her delve into why a nice Catholic girl like her had ended up having four unsuccessful pregnancies after she got divorced. The answer was that my grandmother had so thoroughly robbed my mom of her self-esteem that my mom felt her only value as a human being came from being a mother.

In addition, my mom learned that her mother was seriously mentally ill, probably paranoid. She carefully explained to me what a paranoiac does. She even told grandmother about the illness. Grandmother never did a thing about it.

How did I feel about this? It did not matter to me. It was nice to know why grandmother's behavior was so grotesque, but as long as she was still making our lives miserable every time she could, what difference did it make? For several decades, I could never empathize with what it must have been like to see threats everywhere. Even after I could begin to understand that part of my grandmother's illness, I couldn't embrace her fully, because she had inflicted so much damage on my mom.

I was a little more successful at dealing with the anger and frustration I felt toward my mom for letting herself be mistreated so much. Part of it was selfish, because if my mom suddenly moved away from her mother, then I wouldn't have to dread new episodes between the two women. I begged my mom not to let grandmother get to her and make her so upset. I resisted going to my grandmother's house as much as possible, but somehow, I always ended up there for brief periods. Mom and grandmother were still trying to act as if we had a family that wanted to be around each other. When my uncles came home for their brief visits, my mom would take me over to my grandmother's house to see them. When I was in my teens, I found out that mom was afraid they wouldn't come to see her on their own initiative. Before one visit, my grandmother

harpd on this insecurity so much that my mom thought her brother was going to leave town without seeing her at all. I found her sprawled unconscious on our sofa. Near her were a bottle of vodka (she didn't drink) and an empty bottle of pills. My uncle rushed to our place to take care of her; after I called the only number I could in those pre-9-1-1 days, my grandmother's.

As long as mom was always astonished that her mother chose cruelty toward her rather than tenderness, how could things improve? What I really wanted was for my mom to change. I wanted us to move as far away from Cincinnati as we could, just as my uncles had as soon as they had gotten old enough to leave, but my mom had thought it was her duty as the only daughter to stay in town with her mother.

"What a cute little girl," said the lady, a neighborhood friend of my mom and grandmother as we stood on the sidewalk below my grandmother's apartment.

"Thank you," my grandmother says, her not-quite smile playing around her lips, her eyes focusing on me to gauge my reactions minutely. I know what will come next, and I have made up my eight-year-old mind not to take it any more. I am holding my momma's hand in some sort of kid display of defiance against my grandmother.

"Yes, she is very smart too. I just love her. I'm really her momma, you know I raised her from the time she was born until she was six years old."

I say something to my momma.

"Honey, you're supposed to call me momma," my grandmother says insistently.

"Mother," my momma says in that way that pleads for no public humiliation, not this time.

“My momma raised me,” I say. I am so angry that I don’t care whether my momma backs me up or not. I don’t care if I get in trouble.

“Aw now Rita you know you lived with me until you were six years old; I’m your momma.”

“You are not! You ain’t my momma!”

The lady now seems to realize that she has stumbled into something. I am playing to her. I want her and her sons and daughters who are with her to know that my momma loves me. My momma raised me, not the woman I hated most to be near. I refuse to call her anything as long as she wants me to call her momma. If I’m wonderful, I don’t want anybody to take credit for it but my momma, my real momma.

“ My momma raised me.”

It is clear from the insistence in my voice that I am not going to stop talking as long as the other grown-ups stand there. I want them to know that my momma had not abandoned me. It would be wrong to say she didn’t even want to raise her own child.

The other grown-ups look uncertainly at each other. They see a real ugly scene coming and they don’t want to be around for it. They leave.

My grandmother and momma have words out of my earshot and come back with a resolution.

“Rita,” my mom starts tentatively. “Mother and I discussed it and we know you can’t call both of us momma, so this is what we’re going to do: she wants you to call her Mother, just like I do, and you can call me momma.”

I feel slightly uncomfortable, but I know I might get a spanking if I don’t give in. I turn the idea over in my eight-year-old mind. In our neighborhood, only people who hate their

mommas call them Mother. A mother was a cold white lady in storybooks and on TV. Mother doesn't even mean you really like the person. It would work for me.

It is very strange to love and hate at the same time. My mom and my grandmother raised me. Mom, who had been brainwashed by nuns in elementary school to obey, tried to raise me the same way. I spent a lot of time being frustrated with her for being so loyal to her mother. I spent a lot of time hating my grandmother. I spent just as much time telling my grandmother I loved her. I still say it. Now, she is in her nineties. It's almost out of pity, but most of the time when I say it, I am lying. There is no love in my heart when I utter these words, just a terrible tangle of feelings, psychic memories of the old hurts and pleasures and wariness.

I am dreaming. It is sometime in the early 1950s and I am walking around the old neighborhood, the West End of Cincinnati with my grandmother, only she isn't holding my hand as she did when I was a child, because she and I are almost the same age on this stroll. She is about the way she looked when she was in her 60s, pleasingly plump with gray-streaked hair. I am as I look now, middle-aged and still stout from the steroids I took during a recent illness. We walk for blocks just as we did when I was a little girl, revisiting all the places that were alive once and now have been demolished or ravaged beyond recognition. We go to Farmers Market on the edge of Over-the-Rhine, the old German neighborhood where poor Appalachian whites lived during my childhood.

We stop at the sight of the high school where she took me to her night classes in biology and physics when I was visiting her. I got used to seeing old people in school, so I never thought anyone was too old to learn.

We wander to the two neighborhood movie theaters. I chuckle when I remember my grandmother used to call it going to the “picture show.” She favored the State Theater with its white and dark green façade and only two blocks from her apartment over the Regal that was closer to the apartment where my mom and I lived. The State was my first living lesson in the history of black folks that wasn’t taught in school. Its lobby and refreshment stand were papered in large posters of Lena Horne, Hattie McDaniel and other black stars who were featured in white productions. But even more posters featured well-dressed and good-looking men and women who played in the race movies of the 40s put out by black producers and directors like Hollywood legend Oscar Micheaux. My rejuvenated grandmother takes me to the site of the old movie house to show me that now its part of a high school football stadium.

As we walk, I almost remember the spicy sweet smell of the gingerbread men she used to bring me from her shopping trips, and the pancakes she would make for me practically on demand when I visited her. I smothered them with thick Allega syrup until she switched to Log Cabin. And I can still see the weird, giant talking papier-mache Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in a department store where she took me to see my favorite of all Santa’s pets. The thing scared me to death.

The dream was a vision of what she tried to be to me, the world she tried to show me, the memories no one can take away from me.

I have studied abuse for decades. I can predict what an abuser will do, behavior patterns of both the abuser and the abused, the dangerous dance they do during each attack. I even interviewed women who had fled to a battered women’s shelter once and became so annoyed with the whining and the grating voice of one, I wanted to pop her one myself to make her shut

up. But I will never really fundamentally grasp why one human being treats another so poorly for so long. I've decided something would really be wrong with me if I really did understand why people abuse.

Mom lies in a bed with a serious attack of bronchitis. By the time she seeks treatment, grandmother has to call an ambulance to take her to the hospital. The doctors and nurses care for mom constantly.

With grandmother sitting by her bed, Mom loses consciousness, and the doctor tells grandmother her daughter is dying.

They call for the orderlies to prepare to take her body to the morgue, but mom regains consciousness. She lives.

Grandmother doesn't rejoice. She is irritated.

"Humph! I thought you were finally dead," grandmother tells her daughter.

My grandmother's children died in reverse order from the order of their births. The first to die was her favorite, her youngest son. He was only 44, and he was recuperating from heart surgery to correct a congenital defect when it happened while he was talking to grandmother on the telephone. She called several times a day, even though it must have cost a fortune to make all those calls from Ohio to Vermont.

My uncle and his wife had not said much about the surgery to us for fear of the family drama of operative proportions that would have ensued. He was supposed to rest a lot when he came home from the hospital, but several calls a day don't allow a sick man to rest a lot.

I thought my grandmother was going to fall apart after her favorite child died, but she didn't. Instead she went just a little bit crazier.

When my mom, feeling sorry for her, would try to console my grandmother, my grandmother would lash out at my mom.

"I wish you had died instead of him," grandmother told mom.

My grandmother's wish that her middle child, my mom, die came true when my mom was only 59 years old. Once again, the cause of death was heart disease. My sisters and I took care of mom's final arrangements trying as much as we could to respect her wishes.

When my mom died, she was engaged. For the first time in her life, she loved herself enough to be loved by a man. As mom's grief-stricken fiancé stood over her coffin holding her hand and meditating, my grandmother crept toward him. His sin was that he had been alone with my mom when she died. Mom had been ill for years after a triple bypass operation had not worked well. When mom visited me a week before she died, she had had to take nitro-glycerin tablets several times a day and could not walk without pain, yet she thoroughly enjoyed her last vacation with her daughters, grandchildren and fiancé. I could see in her radiant face the beautiful twenty-something mommy I had cherished as a little girl when I just knew she was the best person in the whole wide world. She left me in Texas on Thursday and died the following Easter Sunday.

"What happened when she died? What happened that day?" my grandmother was demanding from mom's fiancé. The gentle man tried to ignore my grandmother.

"You were with her weren't you? You were there."

I walked up to my grandmother, distracted her and got her away from the poor man. I watched my grandmother throughout the visitation and kept her away from people so she

wouldn't embarrass us in front of mom's friends or inflict untold damage on mom's fiancé. At one point, it got to be too much for me at one point. I went in the lady's room, locked the stall and sat on the toilet.

"I can't even grieve at my own mom's funeral because of her!!" I cried out in the empty lavatory.

Now that my grandmother's favorite target for abuse was gone, my sisters and I speculated that she would try to substitute us. She had to have someone to unleash her delusions and venom upon. One of her favorite tactics was to tell lies to one family member about another so she could foment a disagreement.

No one in the family wanted to take up where my mom left off with my grandmother. We did not want to call my grandmother, visit her or have any contact with her, but like my mom before me, I decided I could contact her once a month. That soon ended. Every conversation turned into an argument as she horribly slandered my deceased mom, saying mom had been a liar and claiming that mom had not raised me at all. My grandmother was so brazen with her version of the past that she would tell me untrue things about events at which I had been present. It was too much. I stopped calling her.

The last of my grandmother's children to die was her oldest son, a recovering alcoholic and ex-smoker who was 76 years old when he passed away from cancer. By the time he died; grandmother was in no shape to do the sort of damage or raise the fuss she might have decades earlier.

"They're all gone now," she told me, sadly.

The memory that produced twisted versions of the truth, is now nearly gone. The last time I saw the woman who was the monster of my childhood, she didn't recognize when she opened the same steel door that had smashed on my body 48 years before.

But there is much more she hasn't grasped. She did not know how many broken relationships and therapy sessions it took for me to understand what she and my mom had done to me. She did not know that I never underestimate the strength of women because my mom survived my grandmother to raise three daughters alone, and neither my grandmother nor my mom was weak in my eyes. Grandmother taught me by example that it is never too late to get an education. Mom taught me never to let a man hit me, always to believe in my own abilities and intelligence, and to try to love people. She told me I was beautiful all the time.

And, most of all, my momma taught me I must live joyfully and exuberantly no matter what.

And He Called Me Miss Lady

BOOM! BA! BA! BOOM! BOOM! BA! BA! BOOM!

On a Sunday morning, I was lying there in my bed luxuriating in quiet and comfort after a tough week as a graduate student and instructor when the thunder of the loud rhythm of hip hop, accentuated by staccato rap, sung so fast that mercifully I couldn't catch all the lyrics -- something about some girl's booty -- exploded under my window. Underneath the music I could hear the growling rumble of an ancient car engine in need of repair.

BOOM1!!! BA!! BA!! BOOM!!!! This was too much, I thought, sure it was the same person who had rumbled through the complex very late the previous night. I got up and put on a wrinkled pair of blue jeans, a dark blue University of North Texas sweater and a beige and green cap to cover my hair which stood like a dark-brown-with-touches-of-gray haystack on top of my head, and a pair of black flip flops with white plastic daisies on them. Yes, I was color-coordinated, I was also half-asleep and more than a little irritated. Maybe, in my early 50s, I'm slowly going into the crochety old lady phase of life.

Clomp, flop, clomp, flop, I heavily went down the steps from my apartment to street level. I saw someone get out of the offending vehicle. A young man with skin the color of mahogany dressed in dark blue baggy nylon jogging pants, big fancy athletic shoes, big baggy powder blue football jersey style shirt, a blue bandanna tied around his head and a cap over that got out of the car, paused, turned to it, reached in through the window and turned the thumping down. That gesture told me he already knew he might be obtrusive. I caught up to him just as he was turning the corner of the building. He had arresting hazel/green eyes and up close, he looked about 17, younger than my freshman composition students at the university.

"Hi," I said.

“Hi,” he said.

“I heard you coming in last night,” I said.

He kind of blushed and looked down at the ground. “Yes ma’am.”

“I just wanted to let you know that sick people and old people live around here.”

Eyes still down at the sidewalk. “I’ll keep it down.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll watch it from now on,” he said, and he called me “Miss Lady.”

He could not have been aware of how far back he took me when he called me “Miss Lady.” It was the soft delight of sweet potato pies, rough concrete, little boys with walnut-colored skin, ragged sneakers and rusty knees running after an older woman to give her something she had dropped and getting a nickel for their trouble. It was my grandmother calling me in after a hard day on the monkey bars, my hands smelling of iron oxide and red with little calluses that were forming on my palms just below my fingers where I held on to the bars to swing and turn upside down over and over again. It was Cincinnati’s oldest red brick projects, where each building was constructed like a three-story fortress. It was the old neighborhood where everyone was a different shade of brown except for the white lady who was married to the dark-skinned man across the street and the pharmacist, green grocer and the owner of the cleaners down the street. It was the whitish haze in the sky hanging low over the dark old houses on the hillsides I could see out my grandmother’s windows. It was the occasional stink of the pork stockyards not too far away. It was the playground where I swam in the summer and laid on a towel spread on the concrete in the sun, letting it dry the water from my body and make me drowsy. It was the exuberant chants of girls jumping rope, and singing “one, two three, O’Leary” as rubber balls bounced and hands slapped a rhythm. It was greens and ham hocks, my

mother's pinto beans and cornbread, the sweet melody of her voice and the liveliness of her laugh when I did something that pleased her. It was so many things that happened so long ago and will never happen again.

The other children in my neighborhood called older women they didn't know "Miss Lady" out of respect and deference. My mom, a college-educated divorcee, didn't want me to call women "Miss Lady" or "Miss" because she thought those terms sounded a little crude, but don't think for a minute she didn't want me to remember my place and respect my elders. I called her best friend "Miss Edwina" and I think that if I saw that lady tomorrow, I would still be unable to call her anything else. The men my mom dated were always "Mr." to me.

When I was a girl, I even had to be respectful to adults who were ridiculous. One of the favorite pastimes my grandmother and I had one summer was watching Miss Ruby leave the building. Miss Ruby lived next door to my grandmother for a total of more than 40 years, but during that summer, she was going through some kind of midlife crisis involving her hair. She was probably in her 60s and her natural hair color was mostly gray with a few strands of black mixed in. My grandmother was ebony-skinned, but Miss Ruby wasn't much lighter. She was skinny and bow-legged and carried herself as if she thought she was still fine.

It wasn't hard to tell when Miss Ruby left her apartment, because all the doors in that old building were solid steel. We just about knew when she would come back, and that was going to be the real show, because Miss Ruby's hair would be a different color every time she came home from the beautician. Her natural silvery gray showed every color to advantage and seemed to make them all brighter. One day her hair was electric blue. Another day, it was yellow. My grandmother and I giggled, but we didn't laugh loud enough for Miss Ruby to hear us. The color extravaganza continued. Miss Ruby's hair was green one time, and the living end was the day

she sashayed up the street with hot pink hair. Just a touch bigger and she would have looked like she had a neon cotton candy ball on her head! My grandmother and I laughed and laughed over that one, but to this day, if I saw that woman, I would still call her Miss Ruby.

When I was 18, I had left Cincinnati for college and seldom returned to visit the world in which I had grown up. Most of my adult life, I had thought I was like that man in the Bible who wrote, “When I became a man, I put away childish things.” When I became a woman, I tried to put them away, but now childish things keep coming back to me in the smiles, laughter and slobbery kisses of little children, the bravado of teenagers, in suddenly onrushing memories of my own youth and in renewed family ties.

It’s all about knowing my place in a world where determining one’s place in the scheme of things is increasingly difficult. As an adult, I have negotiated my mostly white work environments by encouraging people to call me by my first name and by calling others by their first names. It didn’t matter whether there was a 20-year difference in our ages, or whether I was the boss chewing someone out or praising him or her to the hilt, we were all on a first name basis. That’s corporate America. I have lived in and spoken the language of that world for so long that I almost forgot the manners of the one into which I was born, except when I was raising my own children alone. They knew they had to respect adults. They said ma’am and sir, but their world was also an amalgam of what had been passed on to me through my family, and the middle-class white world in which they spent most of their youth. They did not talk back to grown-ups, and now that they are grown-ups themselves, I see them treat their elders with respect.

As I grow older, I find that there are fewer people left who remember me as a child or who think of me as a girl. My cousin Leslie, who at 76 is four years older than my mother would

be if she were still alive, is one of them. Leslie has taken a special interest in my mom's girls since she died 12 years ago. He has also taken on the role of patriarch in our huge family. My late great-grandparents, Leslie's and my mom's grandparents, had 15 children. It takes scarcely any effort to have a family gathering of 100 people. In our clan, generational respect is in a battle for the souls of the younger people, who face the hostility and harshness of life in a city where in five years, police in an undeclared war on black youth killed a total of 15 people – every single one a young black male. Leslie frets about the fate of the young and wants the old ways to win out. Whenever he can, he tries to organize events where family members can gather to remember who we are. To him, being a Carter means something, just as it does to me, because my mother raised me that way.

Almost a year ago, we Carter descendants gathered in Cincinnati for an event that was not only meaningful to us but to others as well. A Unitarian minister from Toronto named Mark Morrison-Reed had done research on the early black ministers in the Unitarian-Universalist Church and discovered that my great-grandfather, W. H. G. Carter, had started the first African American Unitarian congregation in the country in 1918. Morrison-Reed wrote in his book Black Pioneers in a White Denomination that several white ministers heard of great-grandpa's endeavor and went to see it for themselves. They were appalled that great-grandpa's little storefront Church of the Unitarian Brotherhood was in the worst part of town, the West End where I would be born and grow up. Great-grandpa had been raised by an African Methodist Episcopal preacher father and mother in Arkansas, and had been educated and taught at a small black college there, but he had chosen not to be ordained in the AME church. He had decided to embrace Unitarianism, because he was a very independent thinker, yet he retained for the rest of his life his parents' dedication to helping poor black people. The white ministers who came to

visit his church 74 years ago didn't care about all that. They said it was wrong for a Unitarian church to be in a "rowdy neighborhood" and decided not to report the existence of the congregation to church headquarters in Boston, thus they eliminated any chance for help for the poor of Cincinnati from the denomination and denied great-grandpa his place in church history.

Morrison-Reed, who is black, says black Unitarian clergy still do not get full recognition within the denomination. There are still only a handful of them who lead congregations, even though this year, the Unitarians elected their first African American president, a man who had grown up in First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati and attended the same high school I did and graduated from Harvard, which I had also attended for a couple of summers as an undergraduate.

About two years ago, Sharon Dittmar, the young blonde minister who leads First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati mentioned my great-grandfather's chapter in Unitarian history in her sermon one Sunday. My cousin Leslie happened to be in the congregation that day and told her W. H. G. Carter was his grandfather. That was the genesis of a Racial Reconciliation Weekend for the Carter descendants and the members of two Unitarian congregations in Cincinnati a year later.

I was very excited about the event. I had gone to First Unitarian for about a year when I was a teenager, but I had received similar treatment to that dished out to my great-grandfather. I lived in the wrong neighborhood for my Unitarian friends to attend my birthday party, even though the church building was located within walking distance of my house. It is that way with a lot of old churches, both black and white, in central city locations. The parishioners drive in from the suburbs, arrive at about 10:45 a.m. and get back in their cars at about 12:15. The people who live next door to their churches could be people who live on the moon for all some parishioners know.

The Rev. Dittmar was trying to change that at First Unitarian. She was looking for a way to bring her church into the neighborhood in which its magnificent stone edifice covered with the black patina of age stood. With her urging, the congregation decided to make the Carter weekend the launching pad for a new commitment to better race relations and reaching out to others.

This was all great to me, partly because I thought that someone else would be doing the work and organizing, and all I had to do was fly to Cincinnati from Dallas and enjoy myself. At the Greater Cincinnati Airport, which is actually in nearby Kentucky, I hugged my sister and niece from New York City whom I had not seen in years, and we blissfully waited in the airport terminal for Cousin Leslie to show up and give us a ride to the home of the Unitarian couple with whom we would be staying for the weekend. Things were fine until while we were driving over one of Cincinnati's many bridges over the Ohio River, Leslie turned to me and said, "Now, I want you to give the family's response on Sunday." Without thinking, I said I would. This was a family elder asking me to do this. It was a request for which there could be no answer but the affirmative.

Then I thought about what Leslie was asking me, and the pit of my stomach dropped. The Unitarians as part of the service on Sunday would give a formal apology to my family for what had happened to my great-grandfather. The response Leslie wanted me to deliver was to that apology. I felt honored, humbled and terrified all at the same time. As if he could feel my feelings, Leslie added as an afterthought, "I know you can write something real good." That was it. My fate was sealed.

The next evening as we gathered at the church for a special dinner I couldn't fully relax and enjoy anything. I looked into the faces of my relatives, who were, as usual, running around greeting each other, hugging and talking nonstop in everything from gentle southern inflections

to clipped, brusque bursts. They didn't see me much, so there were emotional reunions. One lady came up to me, grabbed me and said we were in high school together. I didn't have a clue who she was. I had been painfully shy as a girl. I realized I probably hadn't known my own cousins, because I had been too bashful to strike up any conversations with anyone. I smiled at her nervously, trying to say neutral things, but she found me out. "I know you don't remember me. That's okay, I told all my friends you were my cousin." Then she let out a booming laugh, and I did, too, since I'm no longer a shy girl, and we had a good old time hugging. Then somebody dragged her away before I could ask her what I should say on Sunday.

I went to sit at the knee of my Uncle Andrew, a man who I think is in his 80s and who is the oldest of great-grandpa's children still living. He is a large, robust light-brown-skinned man with mostly black hair in large natural curls and waves. He is surprisingly quiet for a Carter, soft spoken, and he looks as if his life has not always been easy. I wanted to get to know him, at least a little bit, and I hoped he would give me suggestions for Sunday, because I wanted some sort of official sanction for what I would say on behalf of the family. My grandfather had been one of his older brothers, and I had enjoyed the wit and earthy worldview of the brothers I had known before they died. But there were two problems with my plan that night: One was that Uncle Andrew wasn't talking too much; the other was that everybody else in the family had the same idea as me. It was like watching a king on tribute day as assorted relatives trooped over to him presenting spouses, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The youngest, excited by the prospects of a score of playmates and the potential to commit mayhem, tried to escape quickly into the crowd, but were dragged over to him by their hands. "Excuse me, honey," my relatives said as they stepped over me to get to Uncle Andrew. "Do you want something?" at least twenty women asked, as he waved his hand, almost shyly declining their offers. Some

women just arrived with plates of appetizers and glasses of wine for him. There was stack of plates, emptied by several people who ate what he couldn't. We had no chance to talk about my speech.

When I asked Rev. Morrison-Reed what kinds of things I should say, he reassured me that I would know, and added "don't let them off the hook." I thought I knew what that meant, but without a chance for much more discussion, I wasn't completely sure.

Leslie was in demand everywhere by both family members and hundreds of Unitarians. He smiled beatifically through everything. Time was passing and there was so much to do. I owed my sisters and niece time alone after we had been apart for years. I owed my grandmother a brief visit. She still lives in that apartment I had visited as a child, only now ruins surround her building. They are tearing down the old projects to make way for "mixed use" housing. We had had mixed-use housing in those projects full of families and old folks when I was a child. The 21st century incarnation of "mixed-use" housing would include single young professionals, families, old folks, and, for the first time in the more than 60 years my grandmother had lived in her apartment, lots of white people. I returned to discover that my childhood homes were about to be wiped out in the name of economic revitalization. It made me sad, as if part of my life was being erased.

That night I went to an Applebee's for a late night of silliness and giggles during which my sisters, niece and I ended up singing the Destiny's Child songs that were playing over the sound system, and videotaping ourselves, our heads bobbing rhythmically to the beat. I was tired and just not in the right mood to write a serious speech before going to bed. I told myself I needed rest more than anything. The next morning, I got up hours before anyone in the house and went down to the basement where our hosts had their computers. I was counting on the

deadline pressure response I had cultivated for more than 20 years as a journalist to kick in. I had snatched moments riding in cars from event to event to write notes about what I wanted to say, far more than what I thought I needed for the service. Now it was just a matter of typing them out and cutting down the material. My hands shook as I poised my fingers over the keyboard. Had I waited too long? I was afraid I had. The fear allowed me to tune out everything except the writing before me just as I had taught myself over the years when I wrote in the middle of newsrooms full of tantalizing bedlam. I typed ferociously as the house above me slumbered.

Finally, in what seemed like a few minutes later, I began to hear footsteps as people moved around upstairs. I worked on, now forced by the urgency of my task to ignore my nervousness, ignore my fear and hone in on what my family might want me to say, a very difficult chore. All Carters, regardless of whether they are Muslims, Baptists, Pentecostals, African Methodist Episcopalians, Unitarians, Buddhists, Catholics, agnostics, atheists, or something I haven't heard about yet, share one lesson of Unitarianism handed down from great-grandpa. It is: Think for yourself. I felt that every single one of them from the oldest to the youngest child could formulate a thoughtful response to the Unitarians, and each of would be eloquent and totally different. I love my family, but the clan is a tough crowd and loves debate. I soon closed those thoughts out of my mind and tried to feel their collective wish (at least the majority wish) for our response. I was saving my last version of my remarks on the computer when everyone in the house came downstairs fully dressed for church. I was in my pajamas! I jumped up with the speech hot off the computer printer and got dressed in record time.

It was wonderful being out on that gray, chilly Ohio winter morning. Even though I had become a naturalized Texan used to mild winters, I remembered that this was a warm day for January in Ohio. I could tell, because the snow was melting instead of falling. Carters streamed

into the church. My bittersweet emotions moved most of my jitters aside as I watched my family mill around. Among them, the young man who startled me most was Leslie's grandson Billy, a 17-year-old who looks just like my late grandfather. To this day, I still believe the late James E. Carter was the best looking man in the world. Billy has a smooth yellow complexion, high cheekbones, dark brown eyes, strong black eyebrows and a crooked smile just like grandpa did. Even in his braids and baggy pants, Billy was grandpa's image. About 600 people were there that morning, including 125 Carters who made up the majority of the black people in the church. The minister asked us to stand by generations. Only two of the original 15 Carter children are still alive, and both were there. My mom's first cousins, beautiful yellow-brown silver-haired little women who look just like her, hovered over me all weekend. They gave me strength and the power of knowing that someone loved my mother when she was a girl and still remembered her as she was in all the stages of her life. One of them held my hand as I waited to say my piece.

Leslie, being Leslie, didn't tell me when I was supposed to speak. I knew he would just signal me or something when my turn came. At first, I fidgeted a little, turning my speech in one hand and holding a pen in the other as if I could completely rewrite it as I sat there. I didn't see my name on the printed program or a mention of a response. I convinced myself that not knowing when I would speak was a good thing. Why waste my time being nervous? That didn't work. It only helped me manage to keep my nerves at a low hum instead of a loud scream. Then, as the service progressed, and more people spoke, I convinced myself that maybe I wouldn't have to speak after all. There had been some confusion perhaps. I relaxed for a few minutes, clapping to the music of my minister sister's friend's choir and enjoying other people's jokes. Then, when Rev. Dittmar spoke again, and called Leslie to the podium, I suddenly realized I wasn't going to get out of this after all. My stomach churned as Leslie stood at the podium, a few

feet away from where I was sitting on the front row and called my name, “Starita” (with an implied, “you come on up here now”) just as if I was a little girl being called forth to recite her ABCs or a poem in school.

It felt good to be called that way, and it grounded me. I was doing my part for my family where I knew my place in the world. I felt my great-grandparents, as I often do, watching me, encouraging me. I looked up and through the glare of the lighting, I saw the Old Ones, their weathered dark African and American Indian faces shining with silent love and dignity, watching from above the crowd. Whenever they show up, I am attempting something important and difficult, and they know I need their support to accomplish it. Then I looked down at my sisters and niece and the little old women who look just like my mom and spoke for our family.

“Our shared identity as Carters has everything to do with the principles and struggles of W. H. G. and Beulah Carter,” I said, invoking the names of my great-grandparents. “Being a Carter means something specific and life-affirming to all of us and helps determine how we see ourselves as human beings.”

I touched on my family’s European, African and Native American heritage and said, “we are 15 different colors, but we are all one family.” Just then I heard some affirming amens and hmphs from the Carters, and that let me know I was doing okay by my family. This was good, because the tough part, the not-letting-them-off-the-hook part was coming up. I was fully aware that it takes some nerve to stand in somebody’s church, and even suggest I might be able to tell them what to do. Yet I had to do it, or I would let my great-grandparents and my family down. Great-grandpa would have done it forcefully. I knew that from the little books he had written. I took a deep breath and gathered myself from all the way down in my toes.

“In recent years, there has been a wave of apologies to black people for everything from slavery to neglect of Africa. The reaction among many blacks to groups like the Southern Baptists, a denomination founded on the support of slavery, apologizing for the past has been mixed. We read the headlines and we say, ‘So, what changes now?’ Many black people know that race is still a factor in nearly every option we have in life – how we earn our living, where we live, what house or car we can buy, how our children are educated, where we go to church, or whether we eschew church altogether. I look at efforts like this W. H. G. Carter Reconciliation Weekend here in Cincinnati as different from the rest of the apologies, perhaps, because I expect more from Unitarians than Southern Baptists.” The Unitarians laughed so long and loudly I had to stop speaking until it died down. The Unitarians are proud of their reputation as the most liberal of the mainstream denominations. I continued “It is very meaningful to me that you took the initiative to acknowledge a history that must be embarrassing for you and to attempt to make amends in the present for what was wrong in the past. We Carters commend you on your apology.”

I heard this big sigh of relief from the ministers gathered behind me. I guess they were worried that we wouldn’t accept their apology until we actually said we would. I challenged the Unitarians to continue on their quest for reconciliation and to face the complex issues of race forthrightly. Then I heard applause, and I was enveloped in this gigantic hug from a black robed Rev. Dittmar who had to lean over to do it because she is tall, and I’m short. When the hug seemed to go on a beat or two too long, it dawned on me that she was crying and leaning on me for support. I was pretty much a pile of emotional jelly myself. The male ministers, including Mark Morrison-Reed bent over and hugged me, too, and then I went back to my seat between my older cousins.

That afternoon at the reception at another Unitarian church where family memorabilia was on display, and they dedicated a children's room to my great-grandfather, I felt as if I was being initiated into something special. The oldest member of Leslie's generation took me aside and told me stories of my great-grandparents. Other cousins embraced me and showed me their children and grandchildren. They even sent the newspaper reporters covering the event to talk to me. But most importantly, I felt I belonged. I had a place in this scheme of things. I was the girl Leslie called to the stage, and I was preparing to be an elder knowing full well that my time will come to be among the matriarchs and patriarchs of my huge, beautiful and often contentious clan.

I had been feeling my age recently, but as I looked at all those little old ladies and that little old man, I knew I wasn't old. I knew that real old people serve a special role in our lives. They give us what we cannot name and can never appreciate enough. For me, part of the joy in growing old is looking forward to being able to share the lessons I have learned in my life with those whom I love. I look forward to giving my grandchildren -- when I finally have them -- love and the many fond memories they will need to survive in an all-to-often harsh world. I want to be the one who has the family telephone numbers and addresses that no one can find when that information is needed for wedding invitations and Christmas card lists. And I am grateful for the years I still have left with those who came before me. That appreciation will help me when I lose them, and that time will surely come. They will leave one by one and take their places in that clan of Old Ones who watch over us all.

Never Out of Journalism

Everyone on the cliff had done it but me. Even more galling was the fact that the others were teenagers, less than half my age. They were rappelling down a 50-foot cliff in the scenic, slightly rugged outskirts of Austin to build their character and moral fiber. I was there to watch and write a newspaper story about the day's activities. These inner city bred youngsters were not the ones who spelunked in the caves that snaked under large sections of town. They weren't the ones who wore cowboy boots, dirty from the pasture to school. These were the ones who had had brushes with the law and trouble at school. These were the ones who were classified with a misapplied adjective as at-risk (the society or the schools that produced them should be labeled as at-risk, not the kids). There was fear in their eyes as the instructor strapped them into the harness anchored to the limestone crevasse that seemed to form a right angle with the ground below. But one by one, they took that first blind step backward, away from the cliffside and down into the hole below with whoops of fear turning in mid-air into whoops of joy.

I was the only one standing there taking in the experience vicariously.

I have a fear of heights that stops me from riding escalators and enjoying the view from observation platforms. I confessed my phobia, and gently, these young people began to give me both sympathy and encouragement to try rappelling. They told me how much fun it was; how it wasn't that bad; well, just the first step was bad. They told me I didn't have to do it if I didn't want to because they could understand being scared. They had been scared, too.

Finally, I felt so badly about being the only person who didn't rappel that I shakily agreed to rappel, too. The minute I stood on the edge of that cliff with a yellow helmet on my head and a harness through my thighs, I felt a sense of foreboding. The same sick feeling that comes over

me still to this day when I am in the open at a great height gripped me. My face was contorted in fear.

“You can do it. It’s fun,” the teenagers said, clapping and egging me on in a most touching and positive way.

The instructor, a gentleman with gray hair, who wore shorts, hiking boots, a T-shirt and a straw hat, was talking steadily in his gentle voice. “Now see, this rope is the brake,” he said, pointing to one of the two ropes in my hands. “You pull it when you want to stop. Now that’s really all you have to do.”

I was standing at the top of the cliff in a position that left my body parallel to the ground below. I had the eerie sensation that there was nothing behind or under me but air. I was nearly as afraid to call the whole thing off and try to get out of the harness from that position, as I was to rappel downward.

“Oh SHI-I-I-I-T!!!” I yelled as I took that gigantic first step that took me in a giant arc away and halfway down the side of the cliff. Then the joy took over. I laughed and whooped all the way down to the ground. I had done it. The rush of exhilaration was so great, I was ready to do it again. Had anyone asked me if I ever thought I would feel this ecstatic after jumping off a cliff, I would have said hell no. Yet here I was practically jumping up and down with joy.

In the years since then, I have never strapped on a harness and jumped off a cliff again, but I have taken a huge leap without a helmet on my head or a braking rope in my hand. After 22 years as a journalist, the kind of person who jumps off a cliff just to see how it feels so she can write about it, I decided to return to school and prepare to become a university professor. With all the trepidation of a first-time rappeller stepping off a cliff, I have launched myself into a collegiate world that is almost totally alien to me. Although I had spent a lot of time on campuses

of all kinds gathering information on the controversies over funding, the changes in enrollments, going to regents' meetings and sitting in on the spectacular and entertaining lectures of outstanding professors, I still wasn't prepared to do my financial aid on a computer or register electronically for class. It seemed the English I was majoring in, wasn't being studied in literature classes. Instead to read my assignments and participate in class, I had to learn a new language comprised of gigantic words and the literary theories of Derrida and Lacan, and Bakhtin and many others. I admit that I am still bewildered by some of these ideas, even though I earned an A in literary theory.

As much of a challenge as those things were, the psychic plunge off the cliff and out of the nest I had woven for myself as a journalist was even more daunting. For 22 years, I had belonged to the family, the brotherhood of journalists (we even have a fraternity with male and female members that used to be called Sigma Delta Chi; now it's the Society of Professional Journalists). Like cops and CIA agents, we felt we were part of a profession that no one outside could truly understand. The ethics of our profession didn't allow us to get too close to many people outside of it for fear of developing conflicts of interest. We followed our own strict set of rules, had our own language, gave each other money in times of trouble and had our own parties. The person in the newsroom we liked least could become our best ally when there was a story to work on together or an assignment that posed a danger from without to both of us. We experienced things together while out on our assignments that no one else experienced. In hairy times, we relied on each other to be safe.

We did what we did for the greater good of society and so that the American democracy could function. We didn't do it for the pay. Barbara Walters, Katie Couric and Dave Barry aside,

no one gets rich being a journalist, and we had no illusions that we would become millionaires no matter how hard we worked or how good we were at our craft.

The practices of our profession were arcane; the view of the world skewed. Prize-winning stories came out of terrible events, corruption and disaster. A good news town was a place where you could dig forever and never come to the end of stories about dirty backroom political deals, strange catastrophes like landfills and rivers catching on fire spontaneously, petroleum leaching into the soil in people's yards and making them sick, murders, and schools falling apart. Nobody could do what we did without the right mix of fearlessness to confront people who had money and power, love of writing compelling accounts, the tenacity to double check every single little fact, and a large dollop of just plain old-fashioned nosiness. We fought with our editors to get the worthwhile stories – the ones about the underdog, the dispossessed, the unpopular minority groups -- in the newspaper. It is not the kind of fraternity that one ever truly leaves. I know just by looking at the demeanor of some people whether they are good journalists or not. I can still pick them out in a crowd.

But life forces change. Disability in the form of Crohn's Disease, a digestive disorder that weakens the immune system and attacks nearly every part of the body, forced mine. It was time to find a line of work without a never-ending stream of tensions, unpredictable and long hours and constant involvement in controversy. All those things seriously aggravated my symptoms and made it nearly unbearable for me to work for nine to ten hours a day. So I reached into my small bag of unrealized dreams, pulled out the big one about being a professor and went back to school.

I knew it would be tough to leave a fraternity to join a new club. Professors, at least from the outside looking in, have a much more loosely knit group than journalists. People respect

them for being teachers and envy them for earning a living in a job that provides generous time off for holidays and summer vacations. I was going to teach English, so I couldn't imagine many times when I would be in danger or stepping through the remains of an explosion; going to a place where shots had been fired in the middle of the night; or rappelling off a cliff, unless I decided mountain climbing would be my new hobby.

For the most part, the experience of being on a university campus is exciting. Finally, I can read and talk about what I read and write lengthy papers to my heart's content. Exhilaration, however, often turns to anger and disappointment and a feeling of being totally disconnected from the world in which I have chosen to live. Not only do I come from an entirely different professional world, where most journalists speak among themselves in a rough ungrammatical profane jargon-filled lingo, but most of my classmates are the same age as my sons, and I am one of only three black people in the whole graduate program at the University of North Texas.

After years of digging, digging, digging for the facts and attempting to write so clearly that everyone from PhDs to high school dropouts can understand what I'm saying no matter how complex the subject matter, I have found that success in English comes from doing just the opposite. It is often determined by how well a student can sling the bullshit. Slinging the bullshit is my own private term for using a lot of words to say nothing, or incorporating just enough academic jargon in what you say to look as if you know what you're talking about. Slinging the bullshit only works with others who are slinging away, too. English academics have convinced themselves that the outside world is not sophisticated enough to tell good bullshit from bad. The outside world is most often seen as a bunch of louts who don't get their news from the BBC or NPR, don't read (and if they do read, it's not the good, incomprehensible stuff like postmodern literary fiction), don't think (they watch television for God sakes; that alone will cost you a

million brain cells per exposure) and don't count. This conveniently ensures that there is no one around to point out that when a lot of students and professors speak about almost anything, they are the intellectual equivalent of the nude emperor.

Here, I must confess that my grades attest to the fact that I have become a pretty good slinger of bullshit myself. But sometimes, it bothers me. My bullshit-slinging arm gets sore, and I long to do something more real with more of my time. Or someone says something particularly inane at the wrong time, and I get angry that educated people could say such arrogant or ignorant things. I still see myself as the black woman who struggled in a male-dominated, often racist environment to keep her integrity, raise her children alone and make it through the day. I used to read not to torture my analytical abilities just to get the gist of a single sentence, but to enjoy myself, relax and, if I was lucky, discover something beautiful. I still identify with the louts outside the academic fortress built of literature and long words. I know those inside the fortress stereotype the louts. As a black person, I'm sure at least 98 percent of my people would automatically fall into the lout category. We are barely on the map of literature drawn by my new colleagues. Scarcely any of them know any black authors except James Baldwin, August Wilson, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, who even looks like a literary lioness with her thick silver dreads and stern, mildly haughty expressions, at a time when the explosion in black and Latino book publishing is going like mega fireworks displays on July Fourth. They talk about what "the public" thinks or says or does as if there was one public out there below the Ivory Tower.

I am a fish only partly submerged in the water of academia. I am still a journalist at heart with no noisy, dirty, newsroom womb full of cussing, typing people to crawl into for support, comfort and the reassurance of looking out at the world with someone in the same cockeyed

way. I often miss my old fraternity. I exchange email with a lot of folks like me. We forged friendships in newsrooms that have survived in the years we've been away. We are students, computer engineers, public relations specialists and many other things now, but we know it wouldn't take much excavation to unearth the journalist in our souls.

The Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have brought my journalist's soul even closer to the surface. As I listened to and read reports of the disaster, I wondered which of my former colleagues were missing. I was sure that someone who perished was a friend or a friend of a friend. I wanted to be closer to the grapevine so I would know who was okay and who wasn't.

Classrooms, including the ones in which I teach, erupted in discussions of the events. I tried to give my freshman students an opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts in ways that were forceful, yet respectful of the rights of others to disagree. To me, that was one of the most crucial life lessons I could teach them in the face of enormous and truly unfathomable tragedy. I felt that the things I was doing to get them to think and express themselves forthrightly were important, and I came away from those classes with new respect for their thoughtfulness and ability to articulate deeply held emotions and beliefs. They were very smart, and I was both in awe and proud of them.

Then I switched to my student role and attended my classes and heard the most ignorant and infuriating discussions of the week's events. Most of the carping was at "the media," whatever that is, for everything from producing government propaganda to repeating the same news on television over and over again. Graduate discussions tend to be free-for-alls with the person who yells loudest or is the most obnoxious about talking whether they have something to say or not, getting most of the time. We are supposed to be beyond having a professor point to

each of us to let us speak. I didn't give a spirited defense of my profession. Half the time I was too stunned and a few times, I agreed with what was being said. News executives (I think this is part of what people mean when they say the media, a plural word that some people use to include everything from the neighborhood newspaper to Sony and Miramax Studios. See why this term is meaningless?) do hang out with other powerful, rich influential people too much. They tend to be far more conservative and removed from the hurly burly of the world than journalists who actually gather the news. They are the ones who focus on the business end of journalism. Newsgatherers are the ones who focus on the journalism alone. There is tension in this set-up. Sometimes the newspeople win, and sometimes the executives get to make crappy decisions.

The media, (singular as if they are a monolith) I heard in class, is following the government's orders to produce propaganda "already." "The media," my classmates said, "is not telling us the truth." But why would it matter what the media were saying if the American media are so contemptible anyway, I wondered. Obviously, they had been hanging on to every word these unreliable media had put out on the airwaves in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. I don't think they were reading newspapers much. The ink could stain their fingers. "The media is blowing this whole thing out of proportion. The media is giving out too little information." In the hours following the attacks, "the media kept repeating the same bits of information. Why did they do that?" I seethed mostly in silence. When my one chance came to hold forth in the discussion, I yielded the floor to a student from abroad whose perspective I really wanted to hear. It was a good thing because she contributed something substantive and different to the discussion. Suddenly, class was over.

That classroom discussion festered in me. I couldn't figure out why this particular incident of press (they said media, but they meant the press) bashing got to me. I had a hide

toughened from severely critical remarks, many justified, about the wrongs committed by my colleagues past and present during all the years I was a journalist. A lady had stood up before hundreds of people and said I should be run out of town because of something I had written. Right-to-lifers had shown me grisly dead baby pictures when I was pregnant. I had interviewed a Ku Klux Klan grand wizard. A school superintendent got up in front of the Austin school board and screamed that I should be fired if what I had written about inflated bids on school cafeteria equipment wasn't true. (It was. I knew my job was secure.)

It was hard to get to the precise source of my anger about this group of intellectuals -- some pseudo, some real -- passing judgment on my former peers. Then I picked up a copy of *People* magazine (yes, I read *People* every week. It does not lead to permanent brain damage, as some would have us believe) which dedicated the whole issue to the attacks. There on the page was a photo that helped me realize why my feelings were so visceral. The photo showed a man with an ID hanging around his neck. It looked like the ID of either a reporter or a police detective. He was staggering along with two women, one of whom carried a large shoulder bag, like those many reporters favor, and the other carried a camera with a huge lens attached and other bags of photo equipment slung over her shoulders. Around her neck was an ID as well, but I knew immediately that it was her press credentials. All three were covered in gray dust and debris. They had tied handkerchiefs or rags over their noses and mouths to keep from being strangled by dust. They were filthy and they looked disoriented.

I took one look and knew they had risked their lives for the story.

That was when I remembered the pledge, unspoken, that most journalists take. It is a pledge to get the news and tell the story even at the risk of our lives. Most of the time, thank God, we don't have to risk our lives to get the story. But there are times when we know that we

will be in some kind of danger while on assignment. In other countries, to be a journalist is to defy a government or a violent group that will not hesitate to shoot you down like a dog in the street or bomb your studio or newspaper because you have said or might say something that government or group doesn't like. American journalists like to honor foreign journalists who have been especially courageous. We protest when they are put in prison, as many in Africa, especially during the days of apartheid in South Africa and Latin America have been. We get angry and we mourn when they are killed, as several European and American journalists were while working in Afghanistan where they were covering the war. When a television reporter speaks calmly and authoritatively into the camera while bullets and bombs go off in the background, he or she is putting him or herself at risk so we can see what is really happening. We scarcely ever acknowledge the sacrifice or level of commitment involved in journalists doing their job.

When I was a reporter and editor, I usually wasn't around when the bullets were flying, but I was often there when the bodies were carried out, the grieving relatives heard the worst, the flames leapt from structures where firefighters were in harm's way. I was in flood and tornado ravaged neighborhoods. It seemed I talked to a million people who had seen the worst take place in their lives. Being there, being a witness and one who was helping to write the rough draft of history, made me feel I had a constructive role in every catastrophe. While others could only write checks to help survivors, I had a part to play in the response to these debacles. I helped make the incomprehensible more human, so people would be moved to write those checks. I documented what had happened for posterity, so it had to be right.

Now one of the biggest catastrophes ever had occurred, and I had nothing to do. Like one of my sons who had been in the Navy, I felt profoundly off-balance without a specific role to

play to respond to something that demanded the utmost response. As the thousands who rushed to blood banks, and the millions who gave money attest, it was nearly impossible to see what had happened in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania without wanting to do something. To be thrust into a new role felt strange and inadequate, even though I knew that helping my students make their own sense of the events was truly important work in its own right.

The photo of those dusty journalists made me realize how deeply inside me I had buried a lot of the brotherhood experience, especially the tenet that some stories are worth our lives.

When I was actively pursuing journalism as a career, I didn't dwell on that tenet. I wouldn't have been able to do my job, plus it presented a painful conflict because I was a mother, and I didn't like to think about the possible impact on my children, whom I raised alone. I never wanted to go to war zones overseas or the largest most dangerous cities because of my boys. If their mother came home in a body bag, I don't think any amount of explanation by anyone would have made them comprehend why I had abandoned them permanently. Yet I firmly believe there are some things worth giving our lives for. I like to think that had I been in the right place at the right time, I would have been willing to give my life for civil rights. I would have given it for my sons and for people I love dearly. I would give it for God. And I knew I would give it for certain stories.

That picture brought it all back to me, and I suddenly understood a major part of the reason I couldn't stand my classmates' sneering and easy condemnation of my colleagues. In times of this kind of crisis, all journalists know that someone is risking their lives for the story. It is such a deep realization that it becomes atavistic. We ask ourselves what would I have done?

I remember the Sept. 11 footage on television of a young television reporter beginning his story only to end up yelling a few seconds later as the first tower collapsed, "Run! Run!" A true newsman, he didn't even drop his mike when he took off, and his crew, also true

newspeople, didn't turn off the sound or the camera while they ran. Newspaper journalists scoff at broadcast journalists all the time. We can be as critical of them as anyone. Yet when I saw that young man take off with his mike in hand, I respected him for having been brave enough to get as close to the story as it unfolded as possible.

I will most likely not be called upon to risk my life in doing my job as an English instructor. Most people aren't asked to make that kind of choice, but once you have been in that position, you will always be different from most people around you. You will always be part of a fraternity that scarcely anyone else can understand, and most people would not want to join. Although I thought I was exchanging a fraternity for a club, I realize now that isn't exactly true. I will always carry lifetime membership in the fraternity of journalists in my heart and soul, even though I know I will earn my membership card in the professorial club. I cannot change this fact of my life: I will never be out of journalism.

Fear of a Flag

I stand at the big window in the living room of our first floor apartment in an old brick house. It is nighttime. All day on the news, they have been saying that the National Guard is coming, because the Cincinnati police can't contain the rioting that has broken out in all the black neighborhoods. It is June 1967, and I just graduated from Walnut Hills High School three days ago. I have been robbed of the joy of a milestone by the fear and anxiety that comes from living in a war zone. But my family is not afraid the rioters will hurt us. We are them and they are us, even though we would never think of picking up a rock, throwing a Molotov cocktail or looting a store. It is the police who have always scared us most. We know that if we are in the wrong place at the wrong time, especially during these chaotic nights, we will be shot or arrested, no questions asked.

Mom has been trying to put on a brave face, listening to all the rumors swirling in the streets and watching storeowners put up "soul brother" signs in their windows. In some cases, these signs are stupid. Everybody in the neighborhood knows who is charging exorbitant prices and racing back to white enclaves with the money they have taken from the poor people of the ghetto, who have nowhere else to shop. Everybody knows who won't even touch our hands to take our money for our purchases or give us change; who yells at little children; who never has a smile; or never gives honest, regular customers a break. Their shops are among the first to be destroyed and looted – phony soul brother sign or not.

Tonight, my mom wanted to get my two little sisters and me to go to sleep. After I reluctantly go to bed, I am awakened by the noise, an ungodly rumble that at first I can't identify. I have to see what this is. Mom won't allow us to turn on the lights after dark, for fear we will attract attention to our house. She doesn't want us near windows either.

Still, I crept into the living room in the dark while everyone else slept. Now I stand behind the drapes and look out. The windowpane reflects yellow and orange from the flames along the commercial district four blocks away. In the dark, through the shrubbery and trees in our front yard, I see the olive drab trucks rumbling down our street ominously like monsters in scary movies. I don't even try to count them, there are so many. It is just like watching a World War II movie when the trucks full of soldiers arrive in Paris, except nobody is out to welcome these troops waving tiny American flags. The streets of our neighborhood are silent and empty. We are being occupied by an alien force of white boys with guns, and I am afraid.

The next morning, after keeping me cooped up in the house for two days, mom decides it's safe enough for me to go to walk to Kroger's to buy my toddler sister some milk. Things look normal at first, but as I get closer to the commercial streets, things rapidly begin to change. Walls are blackened and there is more glass on the sidewalk than usual. As I turn the corner to Kroger's, I see grim-looking soldiers guarding the store, their bayonets on their rifles. They glare at me when I walk past them to enter the supermarket. I am scared to death.

All the plate glass windows in that old Kroger's that sells us rotten meat are broken, and the shelves have been emptied. Kroger's is the only store that charges anything close to normal prices, so everyone goes there and takes their chances with the quality of the merchandise. Families with small children, like mine, are scurrying to buy things for the babies. Nobody knows how long the store will stay open in its ravaged state, or who might take offense at the slightest thing, so we are desperate and furtive as we shop.

It is mind searing to see even a small part of the damage in the daylight. Up and down the street are storefronts hunks of glass sticking up like the teeth of sharks. Smoky glass lies everywhere in huge shards, and tiny diamond-like pebbles of glass pave the sidewalks. Workers

are busily installing plywood to keep even more thieves out than the ones who run in and grab merchandise at night. The few black-owned stores are untouched, but closed.

I am angry with the rioters for making the place where I live so ugly. The aged brick grand dames that wear pharmacies and pawnshops like cheap poorly made shoes have been assaulted. Yet they still stand along the street, their columns like thick formerly white calves and ankles now gray and roped with black veins and tiny cracks. Everything is always covered with a patina of age, but now the black patina of soot enhances the effect. I hate to see the ugliness, but I know in the fiber of my being why the rioters did this, and one part of me wishes I could have been out there venting my fury and bitterness with them.

I feel the rioters' anger, because I have had a front row seat to watch my mom's bouts with segregation and prejudice. I sat beside her when she called to inquire about apartments in her best professional voice, and I knew instantaneously when she came home looking dejected that the landlords had taken one look at her brown face and turned her away. I overheard her happy conversations with her friends when she got hired at the Catholic hospital in our neighborhood. My grandmother took me to visit her there once or twice. The cherry red brick and white stone building was full of statues of white saints and white nuns in long black habits. Mom got promoted to emergency room receptionist, but she had mixed feelings about the job. One of her new duties was to make sure black people went to the black ward and white people were treated in the white one. We were barely living on the small salary she earned, still, mom quit her job in tears of frustration and outrage, the day the nuns made her turn away an ambulance carrying a critically ill black patient, because the black ward was full, even though there was room in the white ward.

As I walk home with the milk for my baby sister, I am full of emotions I have never felt before and may never really be able to talk about. I stay by myself as much as possible the rest of the day.

At the end of the summer when those first riots occur, I leave home for Knoxville College. I am in Tennessee the next time riots break out, after Martin Luther King is assassinated in 1968. I worry about my family and check on everybody. They are all okay; I, however, am alone on the fringe of another battle zone.

I am a junior in college when the Ohio National Guard kills four students on the campus of Kent State University in 1970. The Ohio guard isn't the only militaristic group to clash with students in the late 1960s. Years before Kent State, law enforcement officials have come on black campuses and killed students with impunity, often in the name of quelling some sort of disturbance.

State troopers drove onto the campus of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1967 and shot up a girls' dormitory while the terrified residents huddled in the dark. At Orangeburg State University in South Carolina, in 1968, three students were killed and more than 30 others wounded when state and local police chased some students onto the campus and opened fire. Another student was killed by lawmen at North Carolina A&T University, the alma mater of Jesse Jackson, during the same period. Within days of the shootings at Kent State, law enforcement officers in Mississippi killed two students and wounded 12 others near a women's dormitory at Jackson State University.

During the national campus strike that follows the Kent State University shootings, the earlier massacres on the black campuses seem to have been forgotten. At Knoxville College and other black schools, we commemorate the deaths of students who seem so much like us in so

many ways. Our college president reassures us that no shootings will take place on our campus, because we are a private institution. “I am not going to let anybody come on this campus after my students,” he says. “We don’t have to have them here, and I’ll close the damn gates to keep them out myself.”

We understand his determination, but we have already lost our sense of security. I have not felt safe since I was a toddler. I cannot feel safe just because I’m on a college campus. I cannot feel safe just because I’m in America.

But as the years pass, days of rage gave way to days of getting over. Finally my mother, like many other blacks aided by the slightly ajar doors of affirmative action, manages to move into the middle class. These blacks are credited with a huge movement, the New Black Middle Class in the 1970s and 80s. Mom leaves behind food stamps, jobs that barely pay enough to pay the rent, our extended family and her hometown to move to state capital and work for the state of Ohio. The woman who not so long before lived in an apartment where the bathroom ceiling fell on her head while she had her premature baby in her arms, rents a townhouse in a complex with swimming pools, dishwashing machines, bricked-in patios and lots of room in the Columbus suburb of Whitehall. And, yes, it is white all right. One of my sisters is the only black person in the school band; the other is one of a hand full of black pupils in the elementary school. Meanwhile, I graduate from college and move to Connecticut where my husband and I work for a gigantic insurance company, and we, too, join the New Black Middle Class.

During one of my vacations, I visit my mom’s new home and stroll through the neighborhood. One of the townhouses looks like a fortress or a small compound. The floor of the patio is covered with Astroturf. A huge gas grill and enough furniture for a couple of living rooms fill the outdoor space. And flying above all is an American flag on the kind of sturdy steel

flagpole I have only seen in schoolyards. The first time I walk past the place, I am struck by the display of patriotism. Nowhere else in the whole complex does anyone display any flags except those at the main entrance. Even the houses along the nearby streets don't have flags. There were no flags flying at homes in the old neighborhood in Cincinnati either. Residential flagpoles were mostly in white neighborhoods where we were not allowed to live. So, finally, I think sarcastically, mom lives in a real American neighborhood.

When my sisters, who are seven and 12, and I go out one evening, they refuse to walk past the house with the flag. I ask them why.

They say the boy who lives in the house invited them to one day and they accepted. The boy's mother knew they were there, but didn't seem to mind their presence. Then the man came home from work, saw them and threw a fit.

"The white man in there doesn't like us. He called us 'little niggers' and told us to get away and threatened to shoot us. So we don't let him see us walking past there," my seven-year-old sister says. "Don't let him see you. Mom told us just stay away from there, because sometimes she's at work, and she can't say anything to him."

I feel sad that my sisters to have to learn about such harsh discrimination so young. It seems that no matter where we live, or what we are doing, our world is very different from the one we are supposed to believe is the real America.

In Connecticut, I am confronted with the same sensation of separateness. I have conversations with my coworkers and other white people who suggest that black Americans weren't really Americans at all. To them we are some sort of detachable tribe that should put up and shut up. We should have the same views as they do, but at the same time, we have no right to be part of their mainstream. They are totally ignorant of our history in this country; of the

number of times we have fought for the very flag that they say belongs only to them. The first person to die in the Revolutionary War was Crispus Attucks, a free black man in Boston, but they don't know that.

The Boston school busing war breaks out. Some white Bostonians are furious that black students are being bused into South Boston and some of their children are being bused out of the area for the purposes of school integration. In Connecticut, we hear regular reports of the violence in the state just north of us, and we see fallout from the struggle when dollar bills stamped "NO BUSING" end up in our hands. One of my black coworkers cries out of worry and frustration one weekend when her mother forbids her to come home to Boston. The reason is that white busing protestors on highway overpasses have been throwing rocks and other objects at cars containing black people. They have seriously injured dozens of motorists. This, I think, has to the horrible nadir of the terrorism.

Then, the American flag attack happens.

Boston's huge modernistic pink granite government center is the setting. That plaza enclosed by large, tall buildings for courts and state government offices is one of the most surreal places I've ever visited. Pink granite below and granite above almost as high as the eye can see, is disorienting. I felt lost in a manmade alternate terrain with no history, in a city full of history. The plaza seems to belong to no one.

The news accounts of the attack say that a mob of white men, who literally looked like a crowd of Archie Bunkers in their slacks, white socks, shirts and jackets, were protesting busing in the plaza. A lone black man in a suit and tie, carrying a briefcase was going to an office across the plaza from the demonstration. When the white men spotted him, they probably were already worked up, but he was the human spark that set off their murderous rage. They grabbed a

flagpole, the kind with an eagle on the top, and with the most horrible scowls of hatred I've ever seen, rushed toward the black man and stabbed him repeatedly with the flagpole. The photo of the incident that flashed around the world showed the black man crumpled on the ground, already wounded at least once, and the white men charging straight toward him with the pole on which hung an unfurled American flag. This was worse than seeing ugly pictures of lynching victims, because these bigots sullied the American flag, the symbol of the possibility of freedom for my people, just because they didn't like the color of a black man's skin.

I am horrified and depressed for weeks after that. Throughout my life, I've always felt a little like a Pollyanna, trying to hold out hope for harmonious relations between blacks and whites. I look at the long arc of history, just as King said we should, but I cannot forget that I am not 100 miles away from the cradle of democracy, and I see some of the worst racist hysteria I've ever heard of. I become irritated with even my white friends in the Baha'i Faith for professing to champion interracial unity, while turning a blind eye to the racism around us. I drive a wedge between us when I see slights where they see nothing. I know I don't want to fixate on racism, because that can be dangerous and unhealthy for me. I truly believe not everyone is a racist, but I can no longer be as cheerful, as unconscious or naïve as the Baha'is seem to expect me to get along with them. The photo of that black man impaled on the American flag seems to sum up all the ironies of being black in America. What could be more emblematic than literally being attacked with an American flag? The fear I harbor of some white Americans and the way they think of the flag and people like me reasserts itself.

Lest you think my fear of a flag comes from a lack of patriotism, let me set you straight. I can sing the "Star-Spangled Banner" with the best of them. My uncle was an Air Force officer, and my daddy was a paratrooper in the U.S. Army. I even dreamed of joining the Air Force,

myself, but I have to confess it wasn't patriotism so much as being 14 and having a brief infatuation with the idea of wearing snappy uniforms.

For four years in the mid-1990s, I drove a car with a "My son is in the U.S. Navy" bumper sticker, and I was proud of my sailor. The first ribbon on his uniform signified that he had enlisted during the Gulf War Era.

Recently, I found out my favorite cousin was in the Tuskegee Airmen, the renowned first squadron of black fliers, during World War II. Nothing exemplifies the ambiguity of being a black American so much as that era. Black newspapers urged black men to enlist, but they spoke of a double V, meaning victory over racism at home and victory over the enemies of the U.S. abroad. Cousin Leslie got arrested when he and other Tuskegee Airmen peacefully protested against segregation at an officers' club in Indiana. Eventually their names were cleared, but they risked everything in hopes of being treated as equals.

Another black World War II veteran I know is Gus, a man often mistaken for a janitor at a newspaper where I once worked. He told me that when his unit went to England, the white soldiers had told the locals that the black soldiers had tails like gorillas. Apparently, the people in that part of England didn't have much contact with black people, so they believed the story until the black soldiers arrived, and the English people soon saw for themselves that they had been lied to.

While we never see a black man in a D-Day movie, even by Spielberg, American black troops were there. My friend told me about arriving on the beaches of Normandy to begin unloading the supply ship the day after the white boys had landed on Omaha Beach. Although in those days, black soldiers were not officially authorized to fight, they were trained for combat, and they were itching to join the war. Just as the first white soldiers faced withering gunfire and

artillery barrages, the black quartermaster corps, to which my friend belonged, had to do their jobs while becoming German targets. They did as any other soldier would do; they shot back when fired upon. “We unloaded the ship with one hand and shot our rifles with the other,” my friend said.

Years after that conversation, I am in another newsroom, fascinated with a publicity packet on blacks in World War II put out by the Pentagon to observe the 50th anniversary years of the war. I see pictures of black women in uniform marching as a brigade through the streets of a European city. They comprised the postal brigade that kept mail moving to the American forces in the European theater.

I read the material and get lessons on a history so buried and suppressed I’m amazed anyone can resurrect it. I learn that some of the black women who joined the military were nurses. To their chagrin, and I am sure to the indignation of their patients, they were assigned to take care of German POWs. It seemed like a punishment for both groups.

But I am learning even more about black people’s roles in American history. An archivist at the Old Statehouse in Little Rock, Arkansas, tells me that my great-great-great-grandfather was the first black person to address a national political convention when he gave a seconding speech for the nomination of Ulysses S. Grant during the Republican Convention of 1872. “All we ask is a fair chance in the race of life,” said William Henry Grey, my ancestor. “Give us the same privileges and opportunities that are given to other men.”

“The black people know intuitively who is their friend... They know they cannot afford to vote for men, who say to them when they desire to vote, ‘you have got your rights, now: what more do you want?’”

How often we still hear that question: “What more do you people want?”

My family has more than 200 years of written and oral history in the U.S., yet I wasn't called an American until I was 39 years old and in Scotland. It was not a question of feeling more American, because I was abroad. It was, for the first time in my life, being considered just an American like any other of my millions of countrymen and women.

In fact, now that I think about it, I can never remember being called an American while on American soil. I'm African American, or black American or in my childhood, I was a Negro, but I am never simply an American. I feel American, but I am not called one in a million ways both spoken and unspoken.

Now, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, we see Americans of all colors and religions waving their flags. Perhaps, it has taken a tragedy of this magnitude to show us that when the outside world sees us all simply as Americans, it is seeing us in a truer light than we often see ourselves. I hope we learn that we need to break down the divisions that exist inside our own borders. Although we think of the World Trade Center as an American landmark, it was really a financial center for the world. Thousands of people from almost 200 countries died in the flame and debris that day with Americans. This isn't a tragedy that is ours alone. At the memorials and other tributes to those who died, the flags of many nations should fly, not just Old Glory, as beautiful as she is.

I no longer have that car that bore the U.S. Navy sticker on its bumper, but I still own a white sailor cap with "U.S. Navy Mom" embroidered on it. That young man is no longer a sailor. He's not even 30 yet, but he has already made me the mother of a veteran. I admire his choice to learn the same lesson that many black men before him have had to digest: that doing his part for his country is his personal responsibility as an American, even it probably won't guarantee fair treatment in the country that he loves.

Just now, I tied a little red, white and blue ribbon to my car antenna. I don't really know why I did it. A tribute to the thousands who died on Sept. 11? A desire to go along with the patriotic crowd? A sign of defiance against those who tell me I don't have a right to American colors? To soothe a heart already broken as I contemplate all the upheavals and conflicts to come? Or maybe these days, things have changed enough for me to feel a little less fear of a flag.